Crown of Ice
by lady__sansa_stark

Summary

During the changing of the seasons from Summer to Winter, Sansa accompanies Old Nan to watch the winter dance. Unbeknownst to her, Sansa catches the eye of the god of Winter himself.

And he's determined to make her his queen.

Notes

Inspired by the good myth of Hades/Persephone, the wonderful book ‘Wintersmith’ by Terry Pratchett, and the Night(’s) King mythos of GoT.

[Very excited about this fic!!! I’ve had it in my head for a year now, ever since I listened to the album Wintersmith by Steeleye Span (which is based on the book above, and which a lot of inspo for this fic came from).

It’s going to just be such a fun story to write, and I hope y'all like it too! :)) ]
Winter began tomorrow. Trees stretched towards the sky with arms bathed in the echoes of gold and amber and ruby. Streams flowed steadily, though soon their vigor would be encased in ice. From the mountains to the forests and everything in between, the last vestiges of the warm summer would melt into the cold clutches of winter.

Sansa stepped off her stave, her feet crunching gravel beneath. She took a deep breath – held the crisp, cool air in her lungs. Let it wash over her skin, inside her, cleansing.

Home.

She hardly made it three steps beyond the inside gates of Winterfell before she heard her name on the breeze. Little Rickon wove between horses and boxes and legs, jumping into Sansa’s arms with a laugh on his lips. They nearly toppled to the ground.

Her smallest brother was always so giddy whenever she came home. Sansa supposed it was because Sansa looked an awful like Catelyn. And he never really knew their mother.

“Good gods, Rickon! You’ve grown since last season!”

Rickon beamed at that. “Three whole inches!” True – the top of his own wild, auburn curls brushed just beneath her breasts now. It wouldn't be long before he was as tall as her, taller maybe, with the way Robb shot up.

Sansa missed his curls, loving the softness there. She couldn’t help add to the unruliness of them. “How has everything been?”

They walked through the courtyard, Sansa saying hello to the serving hands as she passed. They greeted her in kind. Rickon meanwhile gave his brief account. Of the lands that proved fertile despite the harsh cold clime of the North (hearty grains and vegetables as tough as the people). Of the towns that grew steadily, and the towns nearer the Wall that were suspiciously shrinking. Of the people who asked for help with crops and livestock and a traveling band of thieves that Robb was sent to stop. “He’ll be back soon. And Father will be so proud,” Rickon declared. “Very proud.”

Maester Luwin walked past, wheeling Bran along for his lessons. Sansa said hello to them, too, asking how they were. Bran might not be a knight with sword and shield anymore, but the quill and parchment were just as worthy weapons. Bran, eventually, stopped scrunching up his nose whenever the Maester would say that. He’d long accepted his new life – though it was difficult to miss the wistful stares into the forests and lands beyond Winterfell’s gates.

“And what about Father?”

Rickon was silent for a few seconds. Ah, Sansa thought bitterly. He’s the same as always.

“He’s been the same, I suppose,” her little brother finally answered when they arrived at the kitchens. The cooks were always kind, delighted to see Sansa whenever she came back for the winter. The oldest cook had passed during the summer months, one of the younger hands said. Sansa wished his family well without them, and promised to visit his grave to bless his soul into the next
life. The cooks in turn gave Sansa a loaf of fresh-baked bread. It was as warm and delicious as ever – but the man’s passing took away some flavor.

“Will you speak with Father now?”

It was as warm and delicious as ever – and now sat like poison in her stomach. Perhaps she could bewitch it into actual poison and avoid the conversation altogether.

But she couldn't avoid her father.

“Yes. I need to speak with him before night falls. Do you know where he might be?”

“His solar. He always retires there before supper.”

As always. “Thank you so much Rickon,” Sansa said, plastering a smile on her face. Her littlest brother was so young, sometimes she forgot how much he didn't know. One day, when Sansa discovered the truth, she would tell him. Until then...a little lying wouldn’t hurt. “Have you seen Arya? Let her know I've a present from Highgarden for her.”

His bright, round eyes widened at that. “A present? For all of us?”

A nod. “Perhaps. But I'll give them to you tonight, if you eat all of your vegetables at supper.”

“I am!” he said defiantly. “You said they make me grow, and they have! Three – whole – inches!” he repeated.

Sansa couldn’t help but smile. So young, so naive. “Good. But you won't be getting your gift any time sooner. Now, go find Arya, please.”

Rickon hugged her once more, his arms barely wrapping fully around her waist. Sansa watched as he jogged through the halls, nearly careening straight into a woman carrying a basket of blankets. Sansa apologized to her for him.

The lightness in her heart fell into her stomach, turning heavy and dark and unpleasant.

Perhaps she should find Old Nan first. Load up on allies before going to see her father. But if Old Nan was her usual self, she would show up just when she was needed. No later, no less.

Witches aren't dogs to come at people's beck and call, the woman told her. We arrive because we want to, when we want to.

What if Sansa didn't want to?

The heavy oak door was carved with trees and mountains and a pack of wolves. Sansa traced the reliefs with her finger. The wood had been worn smooth over time, but the scene stood out starkly. She remembered when she was Rickon’s age, barely tall enough to reach the wolves running through the trees. Barely strong enough to push the doors open herself.

She knocked: one two three.

A heartbeat’s pause before the voice beyond announced: “Come in.”

Sunlight caught specks of dust floating in the air between them. Sansa marveled at them. If she squinted, they could pass for snowflakes, sneaking into the castle long before they were due. It wasn’t winter yet, but almost.
"Is it that time already?"

His voice was strong, as sturdy as the solar doors. Echoing in the spaces where the dust specks didn't flutter. Sansa approached and gave him a dutiful kiss to his cheek. "Hello, Father."

Eddard Stark looked older than he truly was, a sign caught only in how heavy the lines around his brow and eyes were etched. His hair was rich and dark – not a speck of winter white – but his eyes… His eyes had seen too much.

His eyes knew the depth of human suffering.

As Sansa moved away, fingerling the books stacked on the edge of the large desk, her father reached for her arm. Keeping her near, keeping her save. She didn't stare at him to know that he was remembering. The soft curls that burned brightest in daylight. The deep Tully blue eyes – a different ocean he once drowned in. The spitting image of the woman he called lady wife.

Silence filled the air. Beyond it: sounds of serving hands yelling to get boxes unpacked; animals whinnying and barking against going to bed for the evening; the quiet thuds of practice swords hitting leather and – "Ow! You bastard!" – flesh. Sounds of life.

Breaking that soft, comfortable silence: "Sansa, you… You don't need to keep… doing this."

Sansa carefully removed her arm from his grip. Eddard didn't fight it, never did. She brushed loose strands of auburn behind her ears. "It's a noble profession, being a witch." This was her go-to excuse each and every turn of the summer season. Thankfully, the ideals of noble and just tugged innate strings within the hearts of the Starks, her father no exception. Her safe excuse for continuing on.

A much better idea than the truth.

Eddard nodded, as he always did. Their ‘argument’ (if it could be called that) panned out the same. In a second he would say: "I know, sweet. I just want to see you safe."

Sansa would respond with: "I am. And I love you, Father. Just as I love being what I am.”

They followed their lines again this time, such a repetitive play. Never once did Ned touch on the reason why he couldn't bear to see his daughter continue to work with the smallfolk as a witch. Or the reason – the same reason – why Sansa couldn't bear to follow another path but being a witch.

Her words were quiet: "It will be okay. I promise to be safe. Truly."

The smile her father gave her was one that said: You won't be safe, not truly. But his lips said: "I know."

Sansa stared at his eyes, at the faraway look that he always got the first day she came back North. Like he was staring at her, watching her – but not. Staring beyond her, to a time long ago.

Sansa didn't despise her father one bit. She loved him, truly, as a daughter would love the man who raised her and cared for her. Nor did she truly despise this conversation. It wasn't the words spoken that made her chest hurt – it was the memories. Soft hands and warm embraces and a face that Sansa could only remember because it looked just like her own.

It didn't take long for her to comprehend his gaze. The way he studied her. The way he painted with an invisible brush the light that bounced off auburn curls and shimmered gold and
The way the edges of his mouth ghosted up into a smile.

Every time summer faded into winter, the North was left with the painful reminder what had happened thirteen years ago.

“I’ll be back soon, Father,” Sansa finally said, not able to bear the ache in her chest any longer.

Eddard waited only a heartbeat before replying, “I love you, my sweet Sansa.”

Somehow – the way he said it, like he had just managed to keep his voice from cracking – hurt worse than the memories of a mother she sometimes forgot.

* * *

“You're late.”

Sansa wrapped her cloak tighter around her shoulders, taking care to check that the gate shut behind her. She wouldn't want horses to escape and be blamed for it.

They were restless, the horses. The dogs, too, and the chickens and the pigs. They knew. The way that birds knew when to fly South for warm winds and brown branches. Sansa felt it in the flowers, too. How they closed in upon themselves, hardened their stalks, prepared to wait until they could bloom again. It, too, was in the dull roar of the streams glittering gold from the sunset. In the way the winds whispered truths between leaves.

“I had to say ‘hello’ to Arya and Bran.” She had brought back trinkets from the South, little animals carved of sweet-smelling wood, and a sharp dagger, and a pouch full of sweets that tasted just as strong as the fruits they were shaped as. (Sansa admittedly snuck out all the lemon candies for herself. A poor substitute for the tart sweetness of lemon cakes and, but it would need to last her until next summer. She, of course, would never reveal this to her siblings). And more than that: Sansa brought back stories. Of the people she met and helped, of the strange six-legged beast that sprinted fast between flower fields that she couldn’t hardly tell if it was human or animal. Of the warmth of Highgarden and the white pillars of Oldtown.

Her brothers and sister always loved the stories the most. Loved that she got to see the world – a fact that Arya had been nagging more and more of their father, Rickon revealed, earning a resounding slap from the sister in question. Thank the gods Arya wasn't holding her new dagger. (Bran meanwhile had resolved to staying in the North a few seasons ago. He once wanted to be a soldier like Robb, Sansa remembered. A sharp pain sliced her chest at the thought).

“It takes a second to say ‘hello’. Less than that, if you really tried.”

Sansa turned then, certain that the animals would be safe tonight. Old Nan stood with arms crossed, lips pursed. Nothing unusual there. The shawl over her thinning grey hair was a marvelous ivory with threads woven in to catch the fading light. Old Nan once said it was to fool men – how, Sansa didn't want to know. Especially if the older lady was fooling men at her very wise age. Sometimes it was a hundred-and-two, sometimes seventy-three. It all depended on how wise the people wanted her to be.

“You look younger every year, Old Nan. How do you manage that?”

The woman blurted out a laugh. “Flattery won't win you any rewards, girl.” Sansa shrugged. “Are your clothes warm enough?” A small jab at the colors more than the thickness, Sansa knew. She knew what to wear in the biting winter: double underclothes and woolen tights and
cloaks and fur lining every exposed joint. But Sansa couldn’t bring herself to wear drab greys and browns and blacks – not a uniform of witches, necessarily, but many oft took to wearing clothes that weren’t tied to houses (they also took to wearing pointed hats. *That* was more the uniform, though an *inconvenience* Sansa forgot hers in the South…). Tonight, she wore a dress of dark red embroidered with leaves and vines in a deeper crimson, outlined in gold. As if to say farewell to Summer.

Old Nan closed her eyes and sniffed the air, one two three long drags. “It smells like it’s going to be a very, very, very cold winter this year.”

At that Sansa couldn’t help but tighten her cloak further, careful of the silver trout that pinned it closed. It was one of the few memories she had of another woman with cascading auburn hair and a warm smile – the scales had been worn smooth. She put her hood up, too, when a particularly chilly wind whipped at their skirts.

It was always cold this night.

Usually, Old Nan would take her on a tour of the neighboring villages. It was supposedly a comfort for smallfolk to see witches during this night, to have them bless their livestock and crops and lands and children. All to survive another season of ice and cold.

Sansa liked it, *this*. This feeling of being *needed*. The look of hope as she promised them with words and tonics that their baby would survive it’s fever. The adoration when a spell or potion *worked*, and dear little Tanya would live to see her fifth birthday when summer rolled around again. They gave her their last loaf of bread, of which Sansa denied profusely. Instead, Sansa took a crushing hug as her thanks. This – she couldn’t deny part of the reason she remained a witch was this.

Sansa hoped everyone survived the winter.

But tonight, they didn’t go to straight to the villages. They flew straight into the forests.

Sansa knew better than to outright ask before they arrived – a retort of *You can’t wait but five seconds girl?* already forming in her mind with a raspy voice that belied the endless valleys etching Old Nan’s face.

Wind whipped at them, searching for any loose joint where it could worm inside and slice her skin open. Above her – small puffs of clouds, a starless and moonless sky. The final dredges of the sun urging them onward.

They disembarked off their staves (Old Nan preferred *staff* over *broomstick*. One of her infinite infallible quirks, along with tapping her boots on the threshold before entering a home, and sleeping with exactly seven blankets. Sansa meanwhile never bothered to inform the old woman that if she tied a few bristles to the end of her staff, well, she could sweep the halls of Winterfell). The last rays of red and purple bled over the mountains beyond, wispy fingers stretching into a pitch-black sky. But here, in a copse of trees, it felt like the night already swallowed her whole. It seeped beneath her many layers of clothes and held tightly onto her bare flesh.

“Will we be giving our blessings later, Old Nan?” Because the thought of *not* being there for the smallfolk… It made her supper claw up uneasily in her throat.

“Yes, yes, yes, child. What are witches if not *routine* .” Old Nan adjusted her shawl, which had fallen down to her neck. Even in the near-darkness Sansa could make out the silvery threads in the fabric. “The villagers will be waiting for us all winter, if they must. But the dance doesn’t wait.”
“The dance?”
As if on cue:

*Clack clack clack*

“What-?”

“Shh.”

“But—"

“Shhhhhhhhhhh. ”

They stood in silence for a moment, Sansa straining to hear it again, as if with the sun gone so had her hearing. Silence. She didn't hear anything – no birds bidding the sun farewell, or animals stalking from their dens looking for unwary prey. Even the wind was quiet.

Like they were all waiting, too.

*Clack clack clack.*

She recognized it then. That familiar beat: one two three pause, one two three pause.

Olenna had shown her the summer dance the first time Sansa visited Highgarden for the summer season. It was an old tradition even the Southerners couldn't depart from. Dancers paired in groups of six, spinning and skipping in tune to a small retinue of pipes and strings. Onlookers clapping to the tune whilst children ran between legs to get a better look. Farmers and fishermen watched, gave tokens to the Queen of Summer for a plentiful harvest. The first crop would be burned in her honor – a prayer for plenty more.

But here, in the growing clutches of darkness and silence. Here, the dance felt secret.

*Clack clack clack.*

Slowly, carefully, Sansa followed Old Nan further into the thickness of brush and roots. The sounds grew louder: bouncing off trees, echoing behind her and above her and everywhere in between. The sounds grew louder and louder until even her own heart beat pumped to that same rhythm. Until even she caught her hand tapping it on trees, her feet stepping to the beat:

*Clack clack clack.*

Questions clawed at her throat. Sansa opened and closed her mouth as often as her very veins drummed to the one two three pause. But where to start? What to say, truly, when even Sansa wasn't sure if the biting cold and darkness surrounding her was real or all part of an elaborate dream.

Besides, Old Nan would have berated her for speaking up. *Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*, she would hiss, like the winding snakes that hid beneath fallen leaves. Waiting to pounce.

Seconds passed, minutes, before they approached the edge of a small clearing lit by a handful of torches set in a circle. Old Nan whipped her hand out to stop Sansa from crossing that border. Because Sansa hadn't been focused on where she was stepping, or where she shouldn't.

At the center of dim orange light: the dance.

There were five of them, standing facing each other in two rows, all clad in night and
shadows. They way they moved – these were humans. Not frozen machinations of ice and cold. A blessing, perhaps.

There wasn't a motley band of pipes and strings to carry the beat, or a cheering crowd clapping in time. There wasn't a ring of men and women and children watching in awe as these dancers of the night twirled in perfect unison, as they skipped between one another without crashing (children sometimes hoped for that, she knew. Good dancers could perform with their eyes closed and the tune as their only guide).

Five people, their resounding one two three pause, and the overwhelming darkness that surrounded them.

Sansa couldn't look away, even if she tried. Even if she did, her own body betrayed her as it moved to that intoxicating rhythm.

Everyone knew that the seasons changed. Everyone had their explanations: gods that fought for attention, gods that vied for a mortal woman’s love. Gods that fought and bickered until finally they split the world.

But they were stories of gods, spoken on lips of humans who.

This. This dance.

Sansa was watching a story come to life.

She found herself tapping her foot to the beat – tap tap tap pause, tap tap tap pause. She found herself mesmerized by the dim shadows cast on the dancers, trying and failing to pull them out of the darkness. She found her blood pumping to the beat, warm and fast.

The dance was stripped bare of what made it lively – the pipes, the children, the appreciation. Still, Sansa couldn't help but stare at the last thing missing.

There were five dancers spinning in the copse of trees, welcoming winter.

There were six dancers spinning in the center of town, welcoming summer.

Was this why Old Nan brought Sansa here tonight? To see the winter dance, yes. But to be in the dance too?

She wanted to ask her. Should have asked her.

But the dance, the beating, the flickering candles – Sansa tried to look away, but she couldn't. Tried to stop her feet tapping and her beat beating, but she couldn’t. Tried to stop that wicked thought (they’re missing a dancer, wouldn’t they want someone to fill the spot?) – but she couldn’t. All she heard was that intoxicating tune echoed inside her very soul.

“Wait,” Old Nan hissed beside her. Reached out to grab her arm.

Too late.

Sansa leapt over the nearest lantern – the flame sputtering for a moment – and found herself as the sixth dancer. She'd watched the summer dance for years, and the steps here looked the same. She didn't have a stick to clack with her partner (a pity), but she had the grace enough to follow their movements. To twirl when they did, to skip and step and drum her feet. The dancer opposite her didn't seem to mind that he wasn't dancing with the air.
Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but her partner smiled.

She did, too. A ridiculous smile spread across her lips as she moved – one two three pause – to the beat.

There was a muted yelling somewhere, drowned in a sea of wind whipping around her and the constant beating clack clack clack. It was in the air, in her head, her heart. Urging her feet to skip and twirl.

Sansa couldn't help but giggle.

The wind around her grew louder, whipping her skirts as she changed partners and mimicked their clacking motion. Sweat lined her face despite the moonless chill. She felt her cloak spill open at her shoulders. She laughed harder.

The wind was louder, louder louder. Deafening her ears. Pelting her soul from above and below and in front and behind. It came from inside her and outside. Everywhere. Screaming.

She heard it just as she saw it.

No. She heard them just as she saw them.

There were names for them in every tongue, a story to go with it. But all of them, in the end, were pseudonyms for what they truly were.

Winter and Summer.

Summer and Winter.

Twin shadows, devouring whatever little light fell upon the dance. Dark silhouettes of incomprehensible shapes. Vaguely human, maybe. But they – whatever they were, if they even were the gods – were far from human.

And they were staring right at her.

Sansa stepped out of the line of dancers, her heart beating as frantically from the dance as it was in fear. The howling wind could have been shouting: Who are you? or Why have you interrupted our dance?

Even: You foolish child.

They moved, slowly, a step towards her. Their shapes faded in and out of one another, it was hard to tell where one began and the other ended. Run.

A hole grew in the hazy form before her – where their mouth should have been. The wind howled against her. Her skin crawled, her blood too, all cold. Frozen. Burning up. Run run run, her mind screamed.

A slithery tendril of shadow reached up for her. Run run run RUN.

Sansa tripped as she sprinted out of the clearing, tipping the lantern with her loose cloak as she went. Someone was yelling – herself? The wind? The dancers?

Every part of her was screaming, none so much as her own brain. A single constant scream. Maybe her mouth was screaming, too. She couldn't tell.
Behind her – reaching for her as she stumbled onto her staff, blindly navigating out and up from the trees (run ruN ruN ruN ruN) – the wind howled for her. The darkness groped for her. Someone was still screaming.

Every part of her was yelling – her brain, her muscles, her bones, her soul – as she urged her staff to fly her faster. To home. To safety.

It was just on the edge, soft orange rectangles of light between impenetrable stone. Winterfell. Sansa couldn’t stop the heaving sobs in her chest.

Sansa couldn’t stop that horrid beating in her mind: one two three pause one two three pause.

She realized why the sixth spot was empty. Why the dancers moved as though they were a full company. Why they weren’t waiting for some witless witch to join in.

Because that sixth spot was for the gods themselves.
Sansa felt him, her, *it*, behind her.

Chasing her. Relentless. Tendrils of shadows whipping after her while wild winds tore at her cloak.

*Faster faster faster*, she yelled at herself, her stave. Her fingers wrapped around the wood so tightly, a surprise it didn't shatter. Her teeth, too, clenched too tight. Her muscles poised for whatever *attack*, whatever *menace* would spring forth from the trees and hills below her. A drop from this height – she'd be lucky to die before she hit the ground. *Faster*. Never going fast enough to outfly whatever *thing* was behind her.

No a thing. A god. Sansa choked out a cry as she willed herself to move faster faster.

Winterfell was a dull orange mass in front of her. A comforting sight. She pushed her stave harder, praying to whatever gods (that weren't chasing her) to let her live. Let her say *I love you* and *Goodbye* to her family before she-

No. She wasn't going to die, not tonight.

Sansa flew over the gates, the end of her stave knocking on the iron spikes. Landed, the shock of it shooting up her legs, stumbling as she found purchase on the stone battlements between the armory and the Great Keep. Her stave twisted between her feet, clattered behind her, down against the stones towards the courtyard. *Forget it*. She ran towards the door of the Great Keep (*please be open*), fumbled with the latch (unlocked, thank the gods), threw it open. Jumped into the shadows as she looked behind her to see the blackness covering the stones over the armory. Blanketing the castle in darkness. Searching for the *foolish girl* that danced in its stead.

She slammed the door behind her. Her breath was heavy, her heart an endless drum echoing through the very fingertips that fumbled with the iron ring. *Clank*.

Safe.

Sansa rested her forehead against the door, eyes closed. She realized how sore her fingers were, how much her muscles burned. *But I'm safe*. Sansa tried to stop her breathing just enough to hear if that *thing* was still out there. If it had been fooled by her stave, satisfied with it instead of her. Likely not, but gods knew what she would do if it did find her. What she could do against the might of Winter.

Nothing.
It was so quiet, Sansa heard her heart beating in her head. Seconds passed, minutes. It had to be gone. Slithered back through the hills and trees to its copse in the woods. Forgetting about Sansa.

Safe.

Sansa pushed off the door, turning. Two steps to the staircase, and then a flight down to the safety of her room. Her feet – tired and aching – stumbled on the step.

And tripped over the lantern.

Fire licked her coat, the bed of grass, the trees that watched over the clearing. Above her was a moonless sky. The stars – that should have flickered like a million pinpoints of light – were gone.

* * *

Sansa shot up.

Her body was covered in sweat. Her clothes and sheets clinging to her limbs. Heavy furs tossed on the floor from her tossing and turning and screaming. She had to have been screaming. She could still hear her own shouts as that thing reached for her. Whispers of cold darkness inches from her skin. Aching to touch her – and kill her.

Sansa wiped a hand over her face, around her neck. She wiped off the sweat with the sheet, though it was difficult to find a dry spot. Sansa combed her fingers through the mess of her hair. Worked her braid free with fingers that suddenly felt swollen and not hers.

* * *

It was just a dream.

Getting caught by Winter, at least. That had been a dream. But the dance, the figures clad and black and twirled to their own beat, the shadows that circled around her and reached for her – all of that had been real. Her legs and feet were sore, from the dancing and the running and the flying as
fast as she could back home. Her hands, too. It took every ounce of strength to let go of her stave when she landed back in the safety of Winterfell's familiar walls. When she stumbled through the dark halls to the safety of her room. It was a mercy Sansa didn't run into anyone on her way back to her rooms, locking the door behind her. The windows, too. If anyone asked her What's wrong, her only response would have been a scream.

Sansa wrapped her arms around her knees, staring at nothing in particular. Goosepimples littered her skin. Her heart was still hammering in her chest. She thought she could smell the heat of the fire licking at her feet. Hear the echoes of the dancers’ song bouncing of the stone walls of her rooms. Her body was covered in sweat, yet she shivered.

*Everything will be okay,* she told herself. The lie comforted her for a second. But she knew, deep down, that everything was not going to be okay.

Knock knock.

Sansa flinched: it sounded too much like the winter song. She barely opened her mouth – a “Who is it?” stuck in her throat – when the door creeeeeaked open. Old Nan slunk in, carefully closing the door behind her. Which was no use, it creeeeeaked on its way closed too.

They stared at each other for a long time. Sansa couldn't look at the old woman's face, at the pair of bright eyes set into flesh that was heavily etched with years. Decades. A woman who had trained a slew of witches – and was Sansa the most disappointing of them all? Maybe. Or, at least she had been a prime student until last night. (To be fair, Sansa thought, Old Nan hadn’t done much describing what was going to happen.) To be fair, Sansa realized, she shouldn’t have been so stupid.

Was Sansa more ashamed that she blatantly disobeyed Old Nan, or that she had completely forgotten about the woman as she flew away?

Old Nan tapped her fingers against her arm. Staring at Sansa with a gaze that could curdle milk. Her voice – when she finally deigned to speak – was quiet, rough. “What ever came over you, child?”

*I don’t know.*

It wasn’t something she could honestly explain. *Logic* eluded her last night. There had been a itch to dance, something like an instinct deep down inside her. Something aching to be freed. Something that told her she had to dance, that it would be wrong not to twirl and spin and tap to the rhythm. Even now, she could hear and feel the echo of the winter beat in her heart.

Sansa didn’t have any better answer than, “I don’t know.”

“First her, and now you…”

Sansa bit the inside of her cheek. “I’m sorry, Old Nan. I–”

“You what? Don't understand the meaning of ‘wait’? You foolish, foolish, foolish girl.” Each ‘foolish’ came out harsher, louder, than the one before.

Sansa hugged her legs tighter. She wanted nothing more at the moment than to disappear. “I’m sorry, Old Nan. Truly, I am.”

“And you burnt your cloak.” The old witch huffed, as if the cloak was just the icing on the disappointing cake that was Sansa Stark. Old Nan was furious. *Beyond* furious. Sansa wasn't sure there was a word angry enough to describe the cold sort of fury Old Nan directed at her.
Sansa stared at her cloak, shucked off at the foot of her bed. Old Nan had given it to Sansa the first winter when Sansa chose to be a witch. It was warm, filled with pockets (and hidden pockets) for all sorts of witchy necessities. She had chosen an earthy green for the fabric (only because Old Nan scoffed when Sansa asked for a warmer color. “Ruining the aesthetic,” the woman had said. Or something of that nature). Sansa held it closed with a silver trout pin at her collar.

Which was gone.

Sansa had thrown the cloak off last night – it had been smothering her, choking her. Her mother's pin was likely strewn somewhere on her floor. She hoped to gods it wasn’t lost on the battlements lining the courtyard. Or worse: lying forgotten in a copse of trees, with no friends but burnt-out lanterns and the fading echo of foot beats.

But more than that: the edges of her coat were singed. From when I ran away, she thought. Wayward sparks grabbing for her with incorporeal fingers. Hoping to drag her back to the god of Winter has he – it – stretched out shadowy hands towards her.

Sansa already feared – knew – the answer, but she had to ask. Her voice was muffled against her arms. “It'll be okay, won't it?”

“‘Okay’...” Old Nan scoffed, though it might have been a disappointed cackle. She wandered to the cloak, brushing it with a foot. Continued to the window and stared out at midmorning sun. “Okay... As okay as I am a tease turning every head when I walk past...”

Sansa couldn’t find the will in her to laugh. Sansa couldn’t find anything inside her but a mocking voice of failure. Only, there was something about Old Nan’s words that caught Sansa's attention: First her, and now you. Her. Her? Sansa’s head shot up from her arms. “Wait, who-?”

Knock knock knock.

“Come in,” the old witch answered for Sansa.

Eddard Stark closed the door behind him, the wood creaking just as sharply, and leaned against it. There were dark circles under his eyes, heavier than usual. Threads of white-grey littered his beard. The lines of his face looked deeper, too, as if he’d aged a decade since Sansa saw him last evening.

Despite the Stark words – Winter is coming, an omen more than a battle cry – the great lord of the North loathed the winter. He never said why. He only disapproved Sansa becoming a witch, but never truly stopped her. Eddard bit his tongue.

The first thing Sansa saw on her father’s face: relief.

The next: fear.

He approached her, cupping her face in his warm hands. Sansa immediately felt safe, and afraid. “Are you alright Sansa?”

Her body loosened under his comforting touch (not loose enough to shed the tears that were moments from falling. Those she would have to wait until she was alone with her horrid thoughts). “I’m fine, father. I’m fine.” Was she though? Because the dried sweat coating her skin. The ever-present hammering of her heart. The way her gaze continued to snag on the burnt edges of her coat. None of it truly was fine.

“Good.” A pause. An attempt of a true smile, only the worry seeping darkness beneath his
eyes contrasted it. “Good.” Eddard Stark leant in to place a soft kiss on the top of his daughter’s head. Lingered there a while, neither of them moving.

Ask him, her mind urged. Ask him why he hates the winter.

For a decade, the changing of the seasons brought on those dark circles beneath her father’s eyes. A tension in his shoulders whenever the first snows fell over the mountains and forests. Oftentimes, Sansa would find him alone at the top of the Great Keep, staring beyond the walls of Winterfell. She tried to ask him once or twice, when she was younger. Eddard Stark stared at her with such longing sadness that Sansa couldn’t bear to ask him again.

So this time, Sansa kept her mouth shut.

“Did everything go as usual last night with the smallfolk?” Eddard was talking with Old Nan now, but he left one hand against Sansa’s cheek.

Old Nan, meanwhile, gave Sansa a knowing look of Of course nothing is alright. But the witch had learned in her many, many decades on the earth, what people wanted to hear. And gods knew Eddard Stark wanted anything but the truth. “Of course, my lord. Though there was some trouble in winter town with a runaway calf. And at Barrowtown. Had to bless a mother’s womb. Praying the babe won’t be born till after the harshness of winter, if the gods are kind. So Sansa and I shall go out finishing our errands today, weather permitting.”

Sansa felt her father’s hand tense at the mention of weather.

“What can you say of the snows this season, Old Nan?”

The old woman caught a loose thread on her skirts and pulled it free. “Always hard to say this early, my lord. But–” she gave a quick look at Sansa, “–I worry it will be a cold winter this year.”

That lump of unease and incompetence grew in her stomach. Sansa tasted something bitter.

Her father nodded. Sighed. “I see. I best check that we’ve enough stores for the whole of the North, in case the storms are worse this year. Sansa,” Eddard turned to his daughter again, giving her another almost-smile. Giving her another almost tearful gaze. But the Northern lord hadn’t cried in over a decade, not since he’d lost half of himself. Sansa felt worse now that she lost the silver pin. “Please stay safe, my love.”

Through the lump in her stomach and the tightening in her throat, Sansa managed an “I will, father. I promise.”

Whether he caught that it was a lie or not, Eddard smiled as he left, the door closing softly behind him.

Long seconds passed. The wind knocked at Sansa’s window. Beyond it, the sounds of the serving hands and smallfolk working to gather stores and prepare for the long, cold, unforgiving winter ahead.

Old Nan shuffled from the wall. “Best go visit those smallfolk, then. I’m not getting any prettier.”

“No,” Sansa managed to say without her voice cracking.

Old Nan rushed Sansa to change clothes. To eat a meagre offering of bread and fruits for
Sansa clambered across the battlements looking for her stave, afraid the darkness in her dreams had claimed it and brought it back to the copse of trees as a sort of trophy for the god.

They rushed to the courtyard, already behind on their duties. If they were lucky they would be able to finish their errands by nightfall. Old Nan preferred working outside in – so they’d be flying out to White Harbor first, dealing with whatever ills the Manderleys had.

“Will it really be a cold winter, Old Nan?” Sansa asked as she mounted her stave.

Old Nan (though old) gracefully mounted hers. All she was missing was a black cat to trail along with her. What the woman had though was a sour face. “I’m afraid so. After the show you gave the Winter god last night… I worry he won’t be kind this year.”

Sansa fumbled with the vials and ingredients in her endless pockets. And with the pin at her collar. Not the trout – she had to admit she lost it, and that was worse than whatever truth that the winter would be harsh because of her. “Maybe he’s forgotten about me…”

The old witched grumbled.

“Nan! Sansa!” someone called out. They looked at each other, not sure whether to fly away and pretend like they didn’t hear anything, or see what was up.

Rickon came sliding around the gate, arms windmilling to catch himself before he whacked his face into the stones. There were inches between him and a flat nose.

“Sansa Sansa Sansa!” he called again, stopping just short of running into her, too. He thrust his hands out to her, palms up, cupping nothing but air. There was dirt lining the crescents of his nails, and from the looks of it a fresh scratch from Shaggydog. “Look!”

Sansa glanced at Old Nan first – and the look the woman wore made Sansa uneasy. She looked back at her brother’s hands, not sure what he was so excited about. Or what he was trying to show her. “What is it Rickon?”

Rickon glanced between his sister and his hands. He gasped. “Oh no, they’re gone!” Looked around, looked up, as if whatever he had might have just fluttered away.

“Come Sansa come, over here!” He dashed off without looking behind him (or in front of him). Sansa had no other choice but to follow, to the displeasure of Old Nan who just wanted to get things done. They wandered through the courtyard, passing through the wall that led them into the godswood. Sansa froze at the sight of the trees – she heard the beating, felt the frozen shadows and the warm flames. Her breaths came out short.

“Here here here!” the boy called out, grasping for something in the air.

Sansa took five shallow breaths before she walked beside him. Still uncertain what, exactly, he was doing.

“Got one!” Rickon exclaimed, turning to show Sansa. His smile was too big for his face. “Look, Sansa, look!”

She smiled for him, assuming whatever thing he wanted to show her was make-believe. Like the time he swore he saw grumpkins clambering around the base of the weirwood. He said they looked like little people, with blue skin and red hair. No one had the heart to tell him grumpkins weren’t real.
So Sansa looked at the palms of his hands certain there wouldn’t be anything.

White.

Her breathing completely stopped for several heartbeats.

“What is it, what is it?” Old Nan asked, coming up beside Sansa. She heard her breathing catch, too. “Oh.”

Rickon was oblivious to the fear wrapping around the witches’ hearts. “It’s snowing already!”

As if on cue: white flakes drifted down between the trees, landing softly on their shoulders. Sansa counted them as they collected on her boots.

“It’s snowing!” Rickon proclaimed, tossing the few snowflakes into the air and trying to catch them. Meanwhile Old Nan and Sansa glanced at each other, nothing at all resembling happiness in their gazes.

There was an unspoken I told you so, in the old woman’s face. But not so much mocking. There was a certain fear there that Sansa felt within her stomach.

“Bloody winter,” Old Nan cursed, flicking wayward snowflakes off her headscarf. She gave Rickon a nasty look when he started balling up snow for a snowball (it was mostly dirt and rocks, with a sprinkling of snow for color). He was too late – Arya jumped from behind a thick oak and pelted him square in the back. No fair! he cried out, scrambling to collect a dirtball to throw at her.

Old Nan turned her gaze skyward. Squinting up through the canopy of leaves, as if maybe she could see through the gathering clouds. Snowflakes started coming down harder – not hard like the storms they would weather in the coming months, but hard enough that Sansa caught a handful on her palms. Old Nan did too, staring at the specks of white that fell on the valleys of her wrinkles. She scowled at it, wiping it on her cloak.

When the old witch looked back at Sansa, Sansa couldn’t stop the sinking feeling in her stomach. Especially at the woman's words: “You can try and forget all you want, child. But it looks like Winter hasn't forgotten about you.”

Sansa stared at the gathering of flakes in her hands. Lifted them until her eyes stung with the proximity, examining them. They were just snowflakes. Stared until her eyes burned the shape into her blinks.

They were snowflakes. Except they weren’t.

She was torn between keeping the flakes and getting rid of them. In the end, Sansa smashed them between her palms, drops of water the only reminder of the gift.

Because each snowflake – the hundreds that fell on Winterfell this afternoon, the billions upon billions that would fall by the season's end – had Sansa's face etched on them.
the flower

Chapter Notes

[I know I've said this a million times but I don't care - I love every single one of you, and for your patience as I (slowly) make my way through this story :) You guys like slow build-ups, right lol?]

"–I swears I saw it out there."

Sansa snapped her attention back into reality. The father was wringing his cap between calloused hands, until it hardly resembled anything but a knot of wood. His gaze never settled on Sansa or the wizened witch beside her, finding a happy medium between their heads. Caught on the frozen panes of the window – staring beyond it. His gaze was far from happy.

"It has been a rather odd season so far, yes," Old Nan answered, tapping her stave against the dirt floor of the hut. Sansa imagined the woman had sneaked a glance at her, as if to say It's been rather odd because of this foolish child here. Thank the gods Old Nan was wiser than she was furious. "But I can assure you, Rodryck, that giant bears made of ice walking on two legs simply do not exist."

"But m'lady—"

Crack.

Old Nan stomped her stave against the dirt floor, echoing off the low roof. The man – Rodryck – shrank, despite his huge height over them. If he was terrified of some alleged ice bear, that was nothing compared to the terror of a wrinkled woman half his height.

Sansa knew her cue. She rummaged through the pockets of her cloak – papers and leaves rustling against glass vials clanking against each other. Sansa pulled one vial out, uncorking it with a pop. Made a show of mixing various herbs – sage and chamomile and rosemary – with just enough magic for show.

They were all the same. Illusions of remedies. Sansa was kind enough to sweeten them with honey to make the lies swallow easier.

"Here, sir." She offered him the vial with thick purple liquid, and with a smile. "This will help stop the visions of the, er, ice bears. Take half now and a spoonful till it's gone." People liked smiles, even if they said they didn't. It reassured them, soothed them. Let them know that whatever crazy sightings or the like weren't entirely a figment of their imagination. Or, at least their minds perceived the smile to mean that.

Though in truth, Sansa tried to smile enough for the both of them. Gods knew it would take more than a smile to make herself believe that what she had done (or as Old Nan liked to put it: screwed up) wasn’t as horrible as it truly was.

"Th-thank you, m'lady." Rodryck swirled the potion, obviously uncertain as to the taste.
But if he believed it would help him, then it would.

After all, ice bears didn't exist.

“That's three houses left then, and then we can get out of the bloody cold.” Old Nan wrapped her shawl tighter around her head, tucking in the ends into the collar of her cloak. The mountains of the wrinkles carved into her cheeks were tinged pink.

Sansa followed, letting Rodryck’s goats sniff her fingers as she walked past the gate. She couldn't help but giggle when the smallest one licked the palm of her hand. Sansa dug through her pockets for a few scraps of grain and herbs. The other goats clambered around the gate, braying for more food. With just a whiff of magic (and shushing the goats so Old Nan wouldn't scold her for wasting her magic), Sansa multiplied the grains in her hands so each goat had a share. They whined for more, nudging their heads against her hand in hopes that she could give in to their cuteness. It almost worked. “I wish I could,” she whispered, scratching their chins. Their fur was stiff against in the cold. She gave a quiet blessing to the gods that the animals would survive the winter – they would be the first to die when the snows fall harder in a few weeks.

And there was at least half an inch of it littering the ground already. It **crunch crunch crunched** as they walked between fields to the next house.

“Do you think he truly saw it, Old Nan?”

The woman laughed loudly through her nose (she did that often), specks of snot catching the evening sun. “Doubtful.”

“But if Winter was…” **Was what?** Sansa didn't even know, and she wasn't sure Old Nan knew, either. If the old witch ever saw something like that before. It felt like something from a nightmare. The shadowy figures of the gods. The coldness that crept into her lungs, her veins. The way time slowed and sped up all at once as they reached out for Sansa. Stared straight into her very soul.

*Clack clack clack.*

Sansa shook her head. It had been two days since the night Sansa danced. Since the god of Winter himself saw her, reached out for her. Cast snowflakes down for her. Were they for her? Sansa hadn't quite figured out if the snow was flattery, or a warning. All she did know was it was snowing unnaturally early because she couldn't fight against the pull to dance.

All of these problems were because of her.

“What's to say Winter isn't trying to, I don't know…” **Give you another gift? “Send a warning?”**

Old Nan was silent. They kept walking, the candle glow of the next house tinting the snows a warm orange. The farms here were in the midst of their season: planting late in summer to harvest just before the heavy frosts and chill settles in, to ensure food for the long months before the sun melted the snows. She spied the heads of carrots and broccoli and potatoes peaking above the early layer of snow. **Good.** Combined with the livestock Rodryck ruled over, this small village should survive. Should.

Sansa (though she knew it was foolish) couldn't help but gaze beyond the houses and fields and pens into the forests. Looking for whatever icy monsters Rodryck might have spotted.

It was hard to tell what was shadow and what was monster.
Maybe Sansa needed to brew a potion for herself.

Old Nan banged on the door. Knocked snow from the sides of her boots as she broke the tenuous silence between them. “He already whipped the winds to blow snowflakes with your face on them, child. Why in the seven hells would the gods do anything that makes sense?”

Sansa wished she knew.

* * *

“You're back!”

Sansa nearly took her friend down with her when the girl jumped onto Sansa, arms wrapping tightly. She hugged her back, just as tight. Missing the warmth of her friend, and the always-present tinge of hay that clung to her hair. “Jeyne...you're...killing me…” Sansa choked out (with a bit more drama than necessary).

Jeyne knew, too, though relented to hugging Sansa a little less strangle-y. “I didn't think I'd see you so soon. Usually not until the first...snowfall…”

Sansa couldn't look her friend in the eye. “Things are definitely different this year.”

They walked through the trees, chattering about all the gossip with the smallfolk and the witches. Silgard was apparently furious at Eryn since Eryn went behind the other witch's back and shagged her brother. (“Maybe if I was blind, and that’s still a big maybe,” Jeyne said with a sour face). Witches were just as violent with their drama as non-magical people. Worse, sometimes, if the witches elected to turn nature against those who’d wronged them. It wasn’t common, but things – siccing animals on people, whipping lakes to drown poor souls – had happened.

It’s the unspoken reason why witches went with non-magical solutions to problems, like concocting potions that were only magical in tricking the mind. The less often witches used their magic, the less likely they’d abuse what the gods had given them.

There were other usual ordeals, too. Smallfolk blaming witches for their crops not flowering as richly as they wanted. Or animals that were hardy suddenly falling ill and dying. Something good happens: praise the town witch. Something bad happens: throw cabbages rotten with pests at her house. Or (and this only happened once since Sansa took the cloak) accost her in the dead of night and burn her alive.

Sansa shivered at the thought.

She admitted to Jeyne it was the same down South, though the lands were kinder than the harsh clime of the North. The same unruly wiles of the smallfolk. The same childish drama amongst the witches. Though there were more witches needed in the Reach, to take care of the livestock and crops that fed most of the country, that some weeks felt like drama was happening left and right. Sansa, thank the gods, had her wits enough not to be the subject of whispers. Or, at least never got caught.

Their voices faded out into the soft sounds of nature. Trees swaying in the breeze, their leaves fluttering one by one to the floor. Birds and critters frantically storing food for the early winter. Water beneath a creek’s icy surface rushed towards the sea.

A rabbit jumped from the bush, scurrying as quickly as it could beneath fallen logs and through the sturdy trunks of trees. A fox jumped around the bush, too. Relentless, stalking the rabbit as it hopped faster.
“I hope it makes it,” Jeyne said with a frown.

Sansa stared until the animals were gone. Their prints slowly covered in fallen leaves. “Me too.”

Long moments passed in the comfortable company of each other. Sansa enjoyed these moments as much as she enjoyed the endless nights staying up gossiping until the candle wicks ran out.

“Is he…” Jeyne began quietly, looking side to side as if them merely talking about Sansa's father (because who else would it be?) would make him magically appear. “…still apprehensive about this?”

_For a decade now, yes_. “Unfortunately. But he hasn't tried to outright convince me to stop in a while.”

“That's good. Right?”

“I should think so.” Except Ned Stark never really urged his daughter into the witch profession, either. Arya wasn’t, nor Sansa’s cousins in the North or throughout the continent. Witches weren't a rare breed, necessarily, like horses with shiny golden coats that highborn nobles paid fortunes for the right of flaunting. Nor were witches spat upon by commoners and nobles alike. Witches were necessary for keeping the peace, for keeping the sanity of those they helped. They were – if anything – good.

Eddard Stark was the epitome of good and loyal, and yet Sansa could see the regret (or maybe disgust? He learned to hide his emotions better over the years) whenever he was reminded Sansa was a witch.

There was another mystery that kept her up at night.

“But enough about me. How was the summer season?”

Jeyne let the previous issue drop. They had an unspoken agreement that if either of them didn't want to talk about something, the other wouldn't pry. So her friend shrugged. “The same as always, I think. Crops that need attending, livestock that need blessing. The occasional childish scrapes – no broken bones, thank the gods, those are awful to deal with.” Jeyne tried once, a few years ago. It was safe to say she healed the broken leg by making all the boy’s bones disappear. No one screamed louder than Jeyne. “Oh, old man Tuomas passed away. His family had a small pyre for him. His daughter inherited his lands and horses – strong things, they are.”

Jeyne was a witch, too, and her domain was in the North. There were other girls in the North, fewer than in the South. There had been gossip that little Lyanna Mormont would be better off as a witch than reigning over the whole of Bear Island (she was no older than Bran). But gods help whoever tried to force the young Bear into anything.

“And what about the South? It must be wonderful to go traveling for a season.” Jeyne lowered her voice when she said: “Even if you have to go with the old witch…”

“Stop blathering, you two,” Old Nan grumbled. Sansa couldn't help but giggle along with Jeyne.

Sansa wondered if Old Nan was just annoyed she was stuck in the North whilst Olenna got to spend winter in the warmth of the Reach. Or maybe (and more likely) Old Nan was still quietly furious at Sansa for being the foolish child. Or both.
Old Nan tapped her stave against a bush, watching the snowflakes flutter to the ground. “We’ve jobs to finish, girls. You can *gossip* later.”

“Of course,” the girls said in unison.

They spent the rest of the afternoon and most of the evening working with the livestock at Winter Town. Jeyne was a natural when it came to animals, so much so that Sansa often felt a pang of jealousy when the smallfolk asked for her and not Sansa. Sansa reasoned it was because they didn’t want to inconvenience the daughter of Winterfell. She had to admit the lie helped.

But if animals were Jeyne’s proficiency, then the harvest – vegetables and fruits and grains and flowers – were Sansa’s.

She remembered years ago sticking a pumpkin seed into a crack of stones in her bedroom wall. The harvest had been rough for most vegetables, a horrid frost rooting itself so deep Old Nan worried the soil itself would go barren. An early frost, and so cold even the hot springs beneath Winterfell couldn’t stave off the chill.

Sansa plucked a handful of seeds from the storehouse and snuck back to her rooms, with her heart hammering so loudly it was a miracle no one caught her. She stuck one into a divet in the wall. Imagining she had a whole field of them: orange blobs of paint from an artist’s brush upon strokes of greens, reaching far out into the purple mountains beyond.

Sansa nearly drowned in pumpkins.

Old Nan scolded her and praised her at the same time. Not the same scolding like when she caught Bran clambering atop the parapet linking the towers (this was years before his fall, when he was barely old enough to walk. Everyone joked that he learned to climb before he learned to walk and talk. Everyone joked there wasn’t a god brave enough to push Bran from the top of the Broken Tower. He once imagined climbing the highest mountain in Westeros, seeing the whole of the continent from Winterfell to Dorne. Sansa hadn’t heard him dream in a long, long time).

So Old Nan scolded Sansa’s ears off, but behind it in her wizened eyes Sansa saw a glimmer of pride. They had more than enough pumpkins to share with the smallfolk in Winter Town. And Old Nan had a new witch to train – a task the woman would never admit to actually enjoying.

Her father though…

Sansa prided herself on being the perfect child. Always doing as her septas asked. Always making sure her needlework was as clean and in-place as her hair. Always saying her please’s and thank you’s (more than was necessary, of course. But a lady was polite and courteous and never talked back). Sansa thrilled in how her parents and her septas and the visiting lords would compliment her manners. Like a pumpkin seed in her chest, growing and growing with each Aren’t you a sweet girl? and You have a steadier hand for stitching than the dressmakers in the capital.

But this look that her father gave her the night of Sansa’s accident – in the midst of serving hands carrying pumpkin after pumpkin from her bedroom – wasn’t a look that Sansa was used to. Gods, she couldn’t ever remember receiving *this* look before.

Sansa felt the warm bubble in her stomach from Old Nan’s praise burst into a thousand million fragments.

Her father was *disappointed*.

Adamant against Old Nan’s suggestion that Sansa should train with her, that the North
would benefit from her magic. Adamant that Sansa would continue her needlework and housekeeping and marry some good-enough lord when she came of age.

Her father’s simple, quiet “Never” rang like a cannon shot through her heart.

Sansa locked the door to her room when it was cleared and finally – finally – let the tears and sobs wrack her body.

That was three months after her mother passed away.

* * *

“Did you eat all of your vegetables?” Sansa asked, running her fingers through Rickon's and Bran's hair. She didn't even bother trying to do the same with Arya – Sansa already got kicked once today by an upset cow, she didn't need another. Bran careened his head away, though Rickon loved it. He had barely been born when their mother fell sick. There would always be something – someone – missing from Rickon’s childhood, that not even Sansa could fix with magic or with gentle caresses.

“Yes, Sansa,” they both intoned.

“Good.” Sansa gave each of them two of the candies she had brought back from the South. They had gorged themselves on half the bag the first night, so much so their tongues and teeth were a rainbow of colors.

Holding sweets against her siblings to get them to eat vegetables? Worked every time.

She plopped a (hidden) lemon candy in her mouth, savoring the warm rush of the South and the sun and the warm breezes. If she closed her eyes, she could pretend the torchlight was the sun. The chattering and laughing was the sound of her fellow witches in the South in the midst of their usual gossip. The taste of lemons from a platter of lemon cakes (that she surreptitiously took a third of back to her rooms. Those lasted two weeks).

“Did you see my snowman?” Rickon asked.

“Yes, though Ser Snowman might need to grow a bit before he can tackle the wolves. He's the right size for grumpkins, though. And don't chew it or else you'll break your teeth,” Sansa said of the candy. “There's an Essosi goddess of trickery, you know. She waits outside little children's bedrooms for their teeth to fall out. And sometimes, if she's impatient, she'll pluck them out one by one.”

Rickon pressed his lips tightly. He stopped chewing the cherry sweet (at least, for a few seconds).

Arya tried – and failed – to cut her sweet with her new dagger. It shot out from the blade, hitting the Maester square in the chest. Arya gave a sheepish half-apology before rummaging through the rushes for her sweet (hopefully not to eat, gods).

“Can you tell us another story of the South, please please please?”

Sansa ruffled Rickon’s hair again. It was criminally soft, like hatchling duck feathers. “Not tonight, Rickon. I need to go check on the horses.”

“Okay…” He went with Bran, pushed by the Maester, out of the hall. Sansa lost track of her sister, but she had to be around somewhere wreaking havoc.
Sansa wandered through the grounds of Winterfell towards the stables and pens, thankful Hullen wasn't around, nor his son Harwin who gave Sansa looks that shivered her to her core.

She entered the stables, a small fire lit every several steps to keep the animals warm. Some were hardy enough on their own to survive the harshest winter without so much a spark of heat. Others were less so. Jeyne knew more about animal handling, but she received word of a mare having twins and flew out just before supper with Old Nan. Not because her friend needed the help of the old witch, but because Old Nan much preferred the company of fellow witches to anyone else.

So Sansa rubbed the heads and necks of each horse, combing through their stiff manes. Most were asleep, worn out from the long hunts to collect as much food and dry wood for what was going to be a long, hard winter. They had enough in the deep storage to last two years – an old habit from the times of sieges and wars. But Lord Eddard was a calculating man, and he warned never to touch the surplus. As if he worried war would come to Winterfell's walls again.

“Oh, you poor thing.” Sansa entered the pen of Frostfire, a large silky white mare whose mane roared like fire when she ran. Her leg was set in a cast – injured from the day's ride, she overheard from the stableman Joseth. It didn't look too terrible; Frostfire was still standing. Sansa ran her fingers softly across the horse’s neck and side, whispered soothing nonsense. “You’ll be okay.”

All of the horses were accounted for, that was good. There were two others with small injuries like Frostfire, though they would be out again in a couple days’ time. Unless the snows become impossibly thick to walk through.

Which was looking like a possibility. It was almost an inch now, and who knew how hard the snows would fall in the coming days. Would the whole of the North be blanketed in white by month’s end?

Sansa remembered a story Old Nan told her back when she was barely a witch hatchling. About terrible storms that were so thick, people could walk from the top of the parapets straight onto the snows.

When Old Nan came back, Sansa needed to know everything.

“Good night, everyone,” she said to the horses as she closed the door with a creaking click. The guards returned to their post sometime when Sansa was inside, bidding Good night, m’lady as she walked past.

Hullen was returning from his own supper, too. “How’re my horses, m’lady?”

Sansa smiled. “Quite healthy, though I hope the injuries aren't too awful?”

The man shrugged. “No, m’lady. Just normal wear and tear. They’ll be back on their hooves in no time.”

“Good.”

Sansa waved him farewell as she wandered north through the snow, leaving fresh prints as she went. There was something exciting about being the first one to walk somewhere, to mark her trail where no one had been before. Terrifying, too, but exciting.

On a quiet night like this, Sansa might have taken to the skies and marveled at the world from above. She did it a lot, especially when she was younger (gods, that made her sound old, but she was still a child, in truth, barely an adult). Looking down at all the world like she was a hawk, free and soaring.
Arya asked her, *begged* her, to take her up on her stave. Sansa did once, her sister too enamored with the feel of the wind whipping at her short hair to say anything as they soared beside falcons and through low-hanging wisps of clouds. They would have flown more had Sansa not botched the descent, not used to the extra weight or the wriggling of her sister. Arya nearly broke both her arms on the landing.

Their father was far from pleased. Sansa counted herself thankful she had Old Nan to convince Eddard not to force Sansa to a life of *normalcy*. Eddard forced Sansa to promise no more *nonsense* and left it at that.

Sansa found herself in the godswood again. Trees clawing towards the sky with half-naked limbs. The lake’s surface frozen enough for a squirrel to lunge across it. The huge weirwood at its center, blending into the snows around it save for the blood-red leaves adorning its crown. Sansa much preferred the cadre of new gods to the old – *so much like her mother* – but she couldn’t deny the awe of the weirwood. Something that she could see, touch. Something that had been around long before humans landed on Westeros’ shores, and would outlive all who lived.

It was the only one in Winterfell. *Just like me*. Perhaps that’s what drew Sansa to the godswood tonight. A camaraderie between two things that didn’t quite exist the same as the trees or people around it.

Sansa bent to pick up a blood-red leaf from the snow as she approached her friend. Traced her fingers along the veins.

When she saw them.

Sansa shut her eyes tightly, tighter. Hoping it was a trick of the light (who else would they be for?). Fearing that it wasn’t a trick of the light (who *else* would they be for?)

It wasn’t a trick.

*Leave now and pretend like you didn’t see them*. 

But she had. And as much as she knew she *should* leave and wrap herself in her furs and shut her eyes, Sansa couldn’t tamp down her curiosity.

All around the base of the weirwood tree were small, ice roses.

She approached them, knelt before a gathering just in front of the tree’s face. They stuck no more than a foot out of the snow, their bulbs no bigger than a head of garlic. And there were *a lot of them*.

Sansa plucked one, twirled it between her fingers, but it melted before she could see if it smelt like a rose. They were fragile things, beautiful things. *Conjured up for me*. She didn't have to wonder *why*. Sansa had known – feared – since the morning she saw her face etched onto the thousands of snowflakes fluttering from the sky.

She wished Old Nan was here. To assuage her fear. To tell her in her trademark biting words that *No you foolish child, the god of winter and snow and death doesn't fancy you.*

If the snowflakes weren't obvious enough, the roses told her plenty.

Sansa stood, following the trail of roses around the weirwood. There must have been at least a hundred, two hundred if she counted the ones that were barely the size of her pinky finger. Each of
them reaching up, clawing for her. If she didn’t know better she would think the petals followed her.

Because they were.

Behind her, in the caverns of her footprints, sprang fields of small roses on hair-thin stems. Reaching out for the warmth of her as she stepped on and on around the tree.

Behind her, in the copse of trees hardly ten steps from where she stood by the weirwood, was her suitor.

The air felt colder, thicker. Sansa couldn’t swallow breaths of it as her fingers froze on the white bark of the tree. Her heart stopped, too.

He – it? – was the same silhouette of shifting shadows. Sansa could see slivers of trees and snow and rocks in between the darkness of its body. It – he – seemed...more solid tonight. Less like the threads of darkness that alluded to its form were absences of light; like the shadows were real. Like the thing that stood, watching her, didn’t exist between the planes of humanity and gods. Didn’t exist as a whisper in the wind or the cold that drenched her soul. Like he was alive.

But far, far from human.

The god of Winter stretched out tendrils of darkness. Left them hanging there – as if offering Sansa something in an outstretched palm.

Don’t do it, her mind reasoned.

Sansa listened to the snow crunch beneath her boots as she took slow, cautious steps toward the shadows.

Run away. Now. Her mind sounded an awful lot like the old witch.

Winter’s head – or what could be assumed was his head – cocked as he waited, watched. What was he thinking? What did gods think about?

What did Winter want with her? She was nobody, in truth. Just a girl, just a witch, nothing else.

Don’t.

Sansa reached out her hand beneath the shadow of his.

Stop.

Opened her palm. Waiting for whatever offering the god had for her.

The thing dropped, a flash of silver. Sansa recognized it before she recognized the searing pain lacing up her wrist, her arm.

Sansa.

She knew she should drop it, but something kept her fingers wrapping tighter around the metal.

It was her mother’s pin. The silhouette of it etched fiery red against her palm. The hole where it used to be fastened at her collar.
Sansa.

A whisper of a bird’s crowing – *kaaaaa* – as if the thing before her tried to speak with more than what he’d said through snow and roses and this newest gift. Again, that deep syllable of speech, that trail of wind through the naked branches of trees. Winter disappeared into the air, like wisps of dandelion seeds blown in the summer breeze.

Sansa was alone again.

In the distance, someone was calling her name. Jeyne, maybe? Or Old Nan. They should have arrived by now. Eager to tell what happened with the newborn horse, and whatever shreds of gossip they overheard.

Sansa looked at the flourishing of roses at the base of the weirwood. “Sansa!” someone was calling – definitely Jeyne. Just outside the godswood’s walls, from the sound of it. More murmuring – Old Nan must have been with her, too.

Gods knew what Old Nan would say when she found out that Sansa *graciously received* the pin and roses from Winter.

*If* she found out.

The fins of the silver trout dug into her palm as Sansa rushed to the base of the weirwood tree, stomped them and kicked them with her foot. Until not a single ice rose remained.
[So I’ve changed some things up with the plot and split this chapter up into two. For cliffhanger reasons lol. Oh, and in case you guys have forgotten: I still love y'all :* I hope you’re still liking this story, no matter how slow I build it up!!]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa could ignore the gifts all she wanted, but that did nothing to stop Winter from sending her them. Nor did it stop the storm from turning the rolling fields and towering trees into blankets of white, soldiers of brown and black against the stark emptiness of it all. It hadn’t felt like a true changing of seasons, really. Sansa had been enjoying the harvests and festivals in the South, and a week later an inch of snow plagued all of the North. From lush greens and rich coppery golds to the sudden nothingness of cold and death…

Sansa couldn’t help but run her fingers through her hair. Couldn’t help but laugh at it.

But the gifts hadn’t stopped. Aside from the snowflakes painted with miniature portraits of her face, or the ice replicas of roses (that she realized with each passing day, got bigger, more elaborate), or even returning her mother’s pin – the god hadn’t displayed any additional efforts to sway her. Which was fine with Sansa. Especially since Old Nan was too shrew for her old age. Quietly discerning the truth. Or Jeyne. Sansa desperately wanted to tell her friend, but a war of emotions won out. Would her best friend be disappointed Sansa did something foolish, like Old Nan clearly was? Would Jeyne understand somehow?

Did Sansa usher the end of mankind with a single dance in the moonless forest?

The uncertainty of it all stoppered the voice in her throat. So Sansa was thankful the gifts had stopped at the roses.

And since that night beneath blood-red leaves, Winter had yet to show up again in the flesh – or, the shadows. Had yet to do more than love her from afar.

Which was good. Only because Sansa had been half-caught in the godswood that night.

* * *

“What are you doing?” Old Nan had interrupted Jeyne’s retelling the moment their feet crunched atop the godswood snow.

“Nothing.” Sansa made a show of hitting the edges of her boots to knock the snow off them. She couldn’t say the truth of it, because there were moments (like right now) when Sansa wasn’t even sure the roses were real, or really meant for her. Even when he showed up, when he stared at her without eyes – Sansa felt her bones and her blood and her very soul chill beneath his gaze. Perhaps there had been some other sorry girl who caught Winter’s affections.

And if so: what happened to her?
Old Nan only watched in silence, her gnarled hands clasped in front of her. There was dirt and blood on her cloak from the horse, but the woman seemed completely unfazed by it. Or: completely interested in something else. ‘You found your pin, girl?’

Sansa’s hand reached for it at her collar. She had clasped it during her frenzied removal of Winter’s roses, trying to right everything that was so very wrong. But the mark of it remained on her palm: the frozen heat of it searing the outline and the scales as an angry silhouette. Sansa winced as she clasped her hand tightly. ‘I… Yes. It had rolled beneath the wardrobe. I hadn’t thought to look there the first time.’

Old Nan scrunched her nose at the obvious lie. ‘I see. Good to hear you found your wits, too.’

Jeyne stared between them, not sure whether she should interfere in some secret she hadn’t been privy to. Sansa couldn’t look at her friend, choosing the glinting moonlight off the lake to be far more interesting. A small swirl of leaves danced upon the surface.

‘Jeyne, be a dear and check on the horses? I’ve heard there were some injuries during the hunt.’

‘O-Of course.’ The girl said, understanding her dismissal. Then added, ‘Good night Sansa.’

‘Good night.’

The walls of the godswood were tall and thick, far enough from the center where the weirwood tree stood proud. Even if she strained her ears, Sansa would be hard pressed to hear the sounds of the castle: of the clanking armor as guards walked along the parapet, of the quiet neighing of the horses or the barking of dogs winding through the courtyard. Here, in the godswood, the world outside just didn't exist. Nature sang through the branches, the only sound.

‘It came again.’

Not a question. There was no point in trying to lie, anyway. Sansa would be found out the next time Winter decided to sprout flowers from her footprints in the snow. Or the next time he chose to up the gift. What would – could – beat ice roses?

So Sansa didn't say anything. It was just as damning as a Yes.

‘What did you do this time?’

‘Nothing!’ Sansa repeated it, quieter: ‘Nothing. I just wanted to see the godswood. And it – he – he appeared.’ It was an effort not to touch her mother’s pin again, though the old witch likely pieced together that it hadn’t rolled beneath Sansa’s dresser. Sansa kept her palm firmly shut despite the searing pain.

‘Did you let any part of it touch you, girl?’

The whispers of biting wind across her skin, like soft, lover’s kisses. But no more than that.

‘No.’

Old Nan might have been quietly pissed, but a brief moment of relief passed through her face (that Sansa, as stupid as she was, hadn’t entirely lost her wits). The relief gone as quick as it came, replaced with a deep crease between her brows and pursed lips. Sansa could hear the echoes of her tsk ing. ‘I’ve an idea, rather fitting for the change of season. Though it has seen you. And it
might not be as foolish as you are, girl.” Old Nan glanced at Sansa’s boots, but made no mention of what exactly she had been trying to destroy. “Or we just send you back to Olenna for the winter…”

Sansa ran her hands through her hair, fingers tangled in the strands in a plea to not let go. Whatever idea Old Nan wasn’t lost on Sansa. But… “Will it work?”

The old woman shrugged, her shawl falling just enough to reveal the snowy white of her hair. “Maybe if it thinks you've left, it will leave too. And take this bloody storm with it.”

Sansa bit the inside of her cheek. It was worth a shot, wasn’t it? And if not for the uncertainty sitting heavily in her stomach, then for the sake of the smallfolk. Of the animals, and the livestock, and all creatures – big or small – that called the North home.

“Okay.”

They passed the stables on their way back. Sansa waved at Jeyne who was deep in conversation with Harwin, the son of Hullen (who was the master of horses and waved as Sansa passed). Sansa heard that Harwin fancied Jeyne: a comely man, and a guard whose leathers had yet to see the brutality of fighting. Hardly an unreasonable match for the steward’s daughter. Jeyne knew of the young man’s affections, after Sansa had to painfully tell her the obvious. It wasn’t unusual for a witch to marry. To settle with a hearth and children and tend to her duties with the smallfolk. But Jeyne was already in love – with all the sorts of animals that roamed the seven kingdoms, from the smallest newborn pup to the hulking cattle that grew soft under her touch. Jeyne’s heart was already filled with love, save for that of a man’s.

Harwin was likely getting the earful of the birthing that Jeyne would have given Sansa had this not happened. And Sansa couldn’t help but wonder (and not for the first time) if maybe she should have told her friend. About the dance, about the snowflakes and the roses and the way the god watched her, stared into her very essence. She would have to say something when she next saw her – to explain the sudden change. Of person, and nature.

They stopped off at Old Nan’s chambers on the lower floor to gather supplies, and asked a kind serving girl to bring up a small tub for washing, before ascending the stairs to Sansa’s rooms. The old witch wasn’t nearly as breathless as one would assume when they made it to the top. Sansa wouldn’t be surprised if the woman outlived all of them.

Old Nan laid out the ingredients on Sansa’s table (which was already overfilled with various herbs and plants and the like). “Here, crush these,” she asked Sansa of walnut shells, sprinkling a handful into a mortar.

As she did, she remembered how she once had a woman fawn over her auburn hair, pleading for a way to make her own boring brown more beautiful. Sansa crushed together beets, marigold, rosehips, and a little of her precious hibiscus that she brought back from the South. It worked – hardly as natural-looking or as deep as Sansa’s own, but the woman was happy enough, had paid the kindness with a hearty dinner and a crushing embrace. And with that, Sansa also had a remedy for when she would go gray: as much as she admired Old Nan and the way the woman embraced her age, Sansa wasn’t sure if she would want to.

You look so much like your mother. Everyone said so, even when the late Catelyn Stark still strode through the halls of Winterfell.

You look so much like your mother. Ned never said the words after his lady wife passed – of a wintry illness, he said. Eddard Stark loved his children, yes, but Sansa knew he detested how much she looked like her mother.
Maybe – in a sick sense of it – this would be good for her.

Old Nan, meanwhile, portioned out the rest of the ingredients: rosemary and sage and nettle. There was black tea leaves, too, of which the woman generously heaped onto the parchment along with the the rest of the herbs, gently crushing the larger ones with her fingernails. By the time Sansa finished grinding the walnut down, the serving girl from before knocked. A small copper tub was placed in the center of the room, three pails of steaming water poured carefully in.

“Thank you,” Old Nan said, flicking them each a copper. The girl nodded her thanks and closed the door.

Sansa filled a small bowl with the steaming water whilst the woman wrapped the parchment closed with twine that had small rocks tied at the ends. This made sure the ingredients were fully submerged in the water. It worked well for large pots of tea, too, or dyeing fabrics. There were so many small tricks – like this, and with people – that intrigued Sansa. Just as useful as magic, the witches told her.

“Now while we wait. Wash you hair, girl. It’ll make it easier for the dye to soak in.”

Sansa did. The two of them waited in silence, both a blessing and a curse. Sansa watched the old woman stare out of the window, curious what went on in her head. Was she thinking about how futile this trick was going to be for a god, as Sansa was? Was she thinking about the implication that Winter had shown up in the flesh within the very walls of what they considered safe?

Was she thinking about the heavy, relentless storm that would kill everything and everyone?

As the minutes ticked by, the silence became more a curse than a blessing. All of the questions that had plagued her, each of the brief interactions with the god. All of it boiled down to a single word.

Sansa asked, “Will the storms truly be harsh like in the stories?”

She knew the answer, but the silence had been crushing. Old Nan didn’t stop looking out into the darkness. “Yes, I’m afraid. Though no point in lying to you – this might be worse than the storm ten years ago. Who’s to say the snows won’t pile higher than the towers. Higher than the mountains, even. Cold winds blowing the song of death.”

Sansa saw it: a deathland of white, endless white that smothered any living thing below it. Unmarred by footprint, by animals. The winter sun glaring down through spots of clouds, futile to save an earth too long gone. The winter sun moving high into summer – and still the snows remained.

She wondered, too, if the No point in lying was a stab at the fact that Sansa was lying. And that Old Nan wasn’t an idiot. Sansa instead asked a gnawing question that had ate at the shadows in her chest since the first time she danced: “What does he want?”

Old Nan didn’t answer. Likely because she – and Sansa – knew the truth of it, and somehow wanted to believe that it wasn’t. That if they blinked just hard enough, all of it will disappear.

“That should do it,” Old Nan said, breaking the quiet by cracking her fingers. Carefully fished the weighted parchment from the bowl as she ordered, “Lean over the tub – this stuff stains worse than moonblood.”

She stared at the stones of her ceiling, listening to the woman strain the dye and pour it into
a clean bowl. Listened to the stool scrape against the floor as she sat with a quiet huff and knees popping softly. Listened to the slosh of the dye, saw it blacking out the candlelights above – no turning back now.

And as the first drips touched her hair, Sansa couldn’t help but ask: “Why?” A repeat of What does he want. Why. Why. Why. Why. The details weren’t needed. Why conveyed just about every question, every uncertainty, that Sansa had had these past days. And she wasn’t sure there was a single answer that would ease the heaviness in her stomach, or the tightness around her heart.

The woman’s fingers were steady as she poured the tepid mixture over Sansa’s scalp. Sansa could feel the reserve in the woman’s motions, before she finally answered. “It’s in love with you. Or so it thinks.” Old Nan huffed a laughed through her nose as she thoroughly brushed the dye evenly through thick tresses. “The fool.”

Is that so wrong?

But Sansa wasn't fool enough to voice her own thoughts, her own concerns. She wasn't fool enough to act on...whatever it was that urged her to dance the first night. A pull – crossing the boundary of the lanterns, entering the copse of night and cold.

A chill shot through her as the old witch poured the rest of the dye upon her scalp. “Why?” Sansa asked again.

“Why what, girl?”

Drop it. “Why does he… Why does he think he loves me?”

Old Nan averted her gaze to her task. Didn't answer immediately, didn't make noise at all save for the water dripping into the tub below. A part of Sansa hoped the woman hadn’t heard. What good would it do to let Old Nan know that Sansa (a small part of her, buried deep where her rationality couldn't find it) enjoyed the attention of the god. It was more than most gave her. Perhaps the only other person who cared was Rickon. Even her own father silently wished she wasn’t her. That she wasn’t someone else.

The woman muttered something that Sansa didn’t catch over the trickling of water. She moved to tilt her head back to see the woman's face, but the angle was too much for her neck. And, Old Nan gently coerced her head back into position. “I'm sorry?” Sansa asked.

Old Nan adjusted the edge of her shawl with the back of her hand, her fingers painted a ruddy brown. Sansa felt her heart drop – she loved her hair. Loved that it was one of the only things she had of her mother to remember her by. That, and the pin.

“I had hoped it would forget about you, since the first snow,” Old Nan began. From this angle, the wrinkles etched upon her skin looked deeper. Made her look older. “Doesn't look like it. But if what I assume is the truth, well, I’m sure you’ve heard enough about the stories of Winter and Summer to come to your own conclusion.”

Of course Sansa did, and not just the story of the Old Gods. There was a variation in every religion throughout Westeros and Essos, though most Sansa only heard in passing or read in withered scrolls found in dusty shelves of libraries. Even the truth between the Old Gods and the New Gods varied only slightly.

But the story of Winter and Summer was one that Sansa thought to be just like a song she loved as a little girl. Even the Essosi stories were exciting: dragons the ruled over nature with their
breath and blinks; goddesses who could weave night and day into an endless fabric of the world; birds that ushered the leaves to fall for the trees’ inhospitality to shelter the creature. And so many more. Sansa much preferred the Seven’s telling. Of a young woman plucking the harvest, which was scarce that year because of her husband who was lord of snow and cold. And a beautiful, handsome young man who strode past her, curious and intrigued. He helped her harvest and promised to save her from the mean clutches of the god that stole her. The young man was the god of warmth and life and harvest. Fought for her because he loved her. And she loved him.

As a song, it was beautiful, poetic. Made her heart flutter at being swept off her feet.

As real life...

Sansa could feel his icy glare as she took up his place in the dance. Felt the wind whipping around her, as if urging her into him. Remembered the way those sinewy tendrils of darkness reached for her as she flew back to Winterfell.

Winter stared at her in the copse of trees lit only by lanterns. But not just him – Summer had been there, too. Lovers who met only twice a year to change hands of the seasons. Relishing in their brief moment to see each other, dance with one another. The sixth spot of the winter dance saved just for their meeting.

The sixth spot Sansa greedily took.

Was that why she danced that night? The excitement of her childish songs come to life? To be whisked away like the girl in the stories by a handsome god?

Only – it wasn’t the warmth of handsome god who fell for her.

No, there wasn’t a thought of childish fantasies in her mind that night. It was… It was something heavier, a taut string pulling her forward to the tune of the beat mimicked in her heart.

But they were both there. Winter, his cold wind howling in her ears. Summer, her dying embers licking at Sansa’s cloak as she ran.

The snowflakes carved with her face. The roses clawing for her attention. Whatever other gifts he had for her.

The storm. She couldn’t forget the relentless storm pelting all of the North.

Sansa gnawed at her bottom lip, realization finally dawning on her. “And I…”

“Yes, girl,” she began. “You took up the spot in the dance for the gods. You’ve heard the story, I presume? Of how Winter and Summer exchange rule of the world. Of how….they are fools in love, never to be together.” She said it with a sour grimace. “It doesn’t help you look an awful lot like its Summer.”

Old Nan patted the side of her head. “Finished. Let it sit for an hour at least before you wash it out. We’ll have to dye it again with a stronger mix, but this should hold for now.” The woman gave Sansa a rag to keep wet strands from staining her clothes or skin. Loose streaks of dye came off onto the rough fabric. Sansa’s hands moved on their own, her brain too occupied with the understanding. The weight of it.

“Thanks,” was all she could manage to say in a small voice. Old Nan collected her things and went to find a serving hand to remove the tub, leaving her alone with her thoughts and changed hair.
Sansa could ignore the gifts all she wanted, but that did nothing to stop Winter from sending her them. The snowflakes, the roses, his adoration. That did nothing to stop Winter from loving her. From thinking her to be his other half, his godly love whom he yearned for since the dawn of time and never held in his grasp, truly.

Summer.

And who knew what went on in a god’s mind. In the mind of a god who willed death upon the earth for half a year. Who would drown the world in endless snow – for her?

Sansa looked through her window, the darkness blanketed the world outside. Could picture the snow piled at the base of the tower – and picture it rising, higher and higher until it smothered the window entirely. Until it drowned all of Winterfell. Sansa looked at her reflection in the diamond-paned glass. She hardly recognized the girl staring back at her.

Maybe Winter wouldn’t recognize her, either.

Chapter End Notes

[Myths of winter/summer I borrowed from these stories here:

https://www.bustle.com/articles/144199-5-myths-about-changing-seasons-to-celebrate-the-end-of-winter

https://nativemyths.blogspot.com/2008/01/origin-of-summer-and-winter-acomalaguna.html]
[This was meant to be part of the last chapter, but I figured it would be better as its own thing (not to mention it ended up a lot longer than I thought, but like that’s everything I write so).

Also thank you so so much to everyone who’s read and kudo’d and commented!! You guys are seriously the best :^) ]

The storm didn’t relent the next day, or the next week, or the week after that. A never-ending thing that sent the enter North praying for the momentary warmth of the sun – but even that was naught, when the biting caress of the wind sank deep into one’s very soul.

There had been a brief lull in the storm one day, however. And by that, only two or three inches of snow had littered the ground. Sansa did her best to ignore how high it reached up the side of the Great Keep. Did her best in those many days to ignore the shape of the snowflakes. The godswood – with its garden of snow roses, of which Sansa stopped destroying only because there was too many. Did her best to ignore the ever-present feeling that someone was just behind her, watching her, waiting. And fought (no matter how deep that itch was) to turn around.

Sansa couldn’t ignore the fact that the storm raged and raged for so many days now – because of her.

“Underfoot? Thought you were shorter...”

Again... Sansa turned around, mouth already open to correct. The man – one of the younger knights, though still considerably old compared to either of the Stark girls – realized his mistake before Sansa said anything. “Oh! M’lady, I’m sorry, I thought, I–”

“IT’s okay, ser...Thom,” she said, recognizing him by the jagged curl of hair sticking up. She softened his embarrassment with a kind smile, too. The knight’s face was beet-red (Sansa envied that shade) as he continued stammering out apologies. He gave Sansa his own sheepish smile, which might have been endearing if he managed a complete sentence.

“That ain’t me, Thorn.”

A lightning-quick flash of brown dove between Thom’s legs (Thorn? A nickname, then, for that lick of hair). The creature was not at all concerned by the fact that Thom’s legs weren’t opened wide enough for even a dog a weasel through, let alone a person. Arya scrambled to her feet beside Sansa, as Thom did his best not to fall straight on his ass. Luck was on his side. Trying to grab hold of the girl, though, was not as fruitful. “Watch it, Underfoot! Could’a hurt you!”

Arya smashed loose strands of hair back against her head. Her furs were dirtied, like she’d been traipsing around and wriggling between trees or walls (or people’s feet) all afternoon. Enjoying the sudden lull of the storm as much as everyone else. Snowflakes peppered all five feet of her.
“Can’t believe you’d think Sansa was prettier than me…” she said with a wink to her sister.

Sansa tried to hit her sister at the jape, but the girl was far too nimble. Stuck her tongue out at her.

Arya flicked a pebble at Thom’s chest leathers, earning her a resounding oof from the man. “You’ll have to be faster than that, Thorn! Maybe we ought to call you Ser Slow.”

“Why you-!” he began, giving chase to Arya, though not forgetting his manners by giving Sansa a rushed “‘Scuse me, m’lady.”

All the people they passed by (and many they had narrowly missed) only shook their heads at the show. Sansa, too, though a smile played at her lips.

This wasn’t the first time in the two weeks that Sansa had been mis-recognized. Not even the twentieth time –

Granted, Sansa should have alluded to dyeing her hair, to her family and to the hands guarding or serving the castle. But the change was so sudden, and the reason caught in her throat. Oh, I just needed to avoid the haunting attention of an Old God, who by the way is unleashing this hellish storm upon everyone. No, that was a mistake even Sansa couldn’t admit to her own family. She still hadn’t told Jeyne. Not because she hadn’t the time, but because...well, the truth caught in her throat like a dry lump of bread. Sansa Stark didn’t make mistakes. Sansa Stark didn’t provoke the gods (Winter or otherwise) by being a fool. She just didn’t.

Even when no one else was around – when it was just her and her chestnut brown tresses – even then, Sansa half didn’t believe the dye had happened.

It’ll change back, Old Nan said when she checked up on Sansa the next morning. The woman applied a heavier dose to some spots that didn’t take to the dye as well, mumbling all the while. Sansa didn’t have to listen to know at least half the grumbled things boiled down to: It’s your own fault we had to dye your hair. Be grateful I didn’t decide to ship you back down South.

Maybe it would have been for the best. To get away from the storm, from Winter. His domain was the cold and ice and snow, not the rolling fields and warm lakes of the South. Most of the witches who tended to the ails of the South had never even seen snow before (horse-faced Hagga said it was just a myth, and Sansa bit back the idea that her ever finding someone to love the girl was just a myth, too). Winter wouldn’t be able to find her south of the Neck. And then maybe, maybe, he would give up. That was why Sansa dyed her hair. That was why Sansa kept out of the godswood, even to smash up the roses. She wanted, needed the god to forget about her. And going South might be for the best...

Except what kind of witch – what kind of person – would she be for setting half the country into a biting storm, and skip away? A horrible one.

Except what kind of witch – what kind of person – was she in the first place for thrusting half the world into an endless blizzard? All because she couldn’t keep her feet from dancing? The worst kind.

So Sansa sat quietly, while Old Nan doused her once-autumn tresses brown, repeating the mantra in her head: it’s all my fault all my fault all my fault.

Supper came and went like all suppers. A horse meat stew, since one of the horses had gone lame last week and the injury never recovered, despite Jeyne’s best efforts to treat the bone. It was
just too cold for it to set properly. Sansa stared at the chandeliers above, bathing the whole of the hall in soft light. The serving hands had to dip into the stores of winter candles already – thicker than the kind that sat upon chandeliers or in bedrooms, meant to last through cold winter nights, and laced with the scent of pine. No one said anything about it, but no one could keep from staring at the flickering wicks throughout the meal. From inhaling the woodsy smell that permeated every room, and know.

Winter candles this early in the season. The snow surrounding the Great Keep was already inching beneath the second story windows.

Would they make it through the winter?

“Sansa!” Someone called her over the din of the dining hall.

She broke her gaze from the fear of watching the candles flicker. Old Nan was bundled with extra furs, and a woolen headwrap. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold. “What is it?” Sansa asked.

Old Nan’s breathing was rough – how far had she been running? Sansa hadn’t seen the woman more than in passing since the morning after the dye (she was too busy cleaning up my messes, a vile voice in her said). Granted, Sansa was just as busy tending to all sorts of problems. A never-ending litany of problems – now exacerbated by a god’s proclamation of love.

Old Nan rolled her neck, her wrists. “You’ve finished with your meal, I hope?”

“More or less.” She had just started, but Sansa hadn’t much of an appetite recently.

“Good. We’ve just got a raven, and I need you to go to Helgen. here’s a farmstead just south of there that needs help. A pesky cold or somesuch.”

Sansa stared up at the old witch. A farmstead with a cold? Then, “What about Jeyne? She is much better with animal colds and–”

“She is still in Winter Town taking care of another sick sow. And it is not an animal who’s fallen ill.”

Realization hit Sansa. The responsibility of it should things...not go well. Sometimes when frost hit crops hard, Sansa would use up magic to enlarge what little picked harvest they had, or force a handful of seeds to maturity. So they wouldn’t starve. But it was the guilt that she had failed, more than anything, that made her feel responsible.. And it was the guilt that kept Sansa from telling anyone the truth behind her sudden change yet. “Then– Then wouldn’t Silgard or Eryn be better if it’s a person?”

“If I needed Silgard or Eryn or even Wylla, I would have asked them, wouldn’t I?”

Sansa bit the inside of her lip. Old Nan was only this biting when things were stressful. The woman hadn’t even been this bad when she came to scold Sansa for jumping into the Winter Dance.

Old Nan must have realized this, too, in a (very) rare moment of empathy. “It’s been a hard winter for everyone, even witches. I’m sure you are aware, girl. So it’s best we help everyone now as much as we can before…” ...before gods-knew-what was going to happen worse than this storm.

Would the storm let up before or after the end of all living things?

But it was true – winters had been hard for decades, especially for witches. Ever since the
old reign of the recent mad Dragon kings. Mad men who hunted anyone with a shred of magical power in them. To prevent someone from overthrowing him. (But it wasn’t at all necessary to string up girls as young as ten or women as old as eight in the middle of the throne room, and laugh as they fell onto the fires). To think it would have been one of his own guards to slit the last king’s throat. So witches like Old Nan and Olenna who had survived the hunts were few, teaching witches with the barest shred of magic in them to keep the profession alive. The loss of centuries of knowledge about, well, everything hit the kingdom hard.

Still, the winters were hard. This the hardest. Sansa came home exhausted every night, if she came home at all.

She didn't know how much help she could be tonight, but she knew she couldn’t say no. Even with exhaustion urging her to decline and collapse on her bed. Sansa stood, pushing away her near-full bowl of horse soup. “When do we leave? Now?”

“No.” Old Nan shook her head. Continued before Sansa could voice her confusion, “You’ll be leaving. Now.”

“But–”

“But the winter is hard, girl, as I said. And us witches are spread thin. As much as I would like to accompany you, I am needed immediately in White Harbor. Just as you’re immediately needed in Helgen.”

The woman leaned in, so much so that Sansa could smell the lilac water she doused on her neck and wrists. To mask her age, though Old Nan would never admit the truth behind it. “Go and help them, and then come straight back. Do you understand, Sansa?”

Don’t do anything rash again, she truly said. Don’t go provoking the god of Winter. Don’t go trying to think this is anything at all like a child’s story.

Because if the endless storms or the endless problems plaguing the North were any indicator… Sansa nodded, suddenly wishing to curl up beneath her furs instead. She tried to swallow down her fears. They remained lodged there, a rough lump caught in her throat.

So she alone flew against the biting cold, with a waning moon guiding her east.

* * *

There were torches flickering outside the farmstead a mile south of the small village of Helgen. Three buildings made up the farm, and surrounding those were acres of white-and-black crops swaying against the wind. Not even a wolf’s howl pierced the silence as she flew close enough to make sense of the scene out front. Two children and their made-up friend, and a large brown dog laying atop the wooden steps of the house looking bored.

“Iron enough to make a nail,” a little girl – hardly Arya’s age – sang, skipping around collecting bits of twigs and rocks.

There was a boy, too, a little younger than the girl. He stood on tip-toe, packing snow on a snowman that was as tall and chubby as he was. He was singing wildly off-key, but didn’t mind. “Lime enough to paint a wall.”

Sansa watched them as she landed softly beside the barn on the fresh snow. The torchlight cast the snow there a flickering orange. Sounds of sleeping animals mixed with the whistling wind through the potato fields. Deep in the house, people were mumbling.
Building a snowman, singing a nonsense poem she hadn’t heard in years. Laughing. To be that young again. That innocent. Sansa envied them.

“Gold enough to buy a bean,” the girl continued, shoving in the rocks and twigs to make the snowman’s face. It was a lopsided smile, and one eye was twice the size of the other. She stood back, admiring her work with pride.

The boy slapped a large mound of snow on the head, as if giving their friend a hat. “And silver enough to coat a cow–”

“No no no!” the girl interrupted. “It’s coat a pin, not cow!”

“No, it isn’t!”

“Yes it is!”

“Sofie! Alesan!” someone called from an open door. The kids startled, one accidently knocking a chunk out of the snowman’s belly. “Get in now afore the storm comes back!”

“But-!” the girl whined.

“No buts!”

They groaned in unison – one thing they agreed on – before patting goodbye to their new friend of ice and stones. The dog lazily followed them inside.

There was still time to leave. For all they knew, their raven got caught in a freak blast of wind and lost track of Winterfell. Or got eaten by a wild wolf, hungry for anything to eat. No one had to know that Sansa stopped by to help them.

She knocked on the door. The dog barked, followed shortly by a Shush!

“Hello?” a woman answered wearily. She was as tall as Sansa, bundled up in well-worn furs. Her nose was pink from the cold.

Sansa smiled – a smile was good. A smile meant Yes hello I know what I am doing and I am here to help you. Even if the witch knew nothing about what her task was. Even if the witch knew she would fail. It made the outcome less painful for the smallfolk she was helping.

A pity smiles didn’t work on witches.

“Yes, hello, and good evening. I received word that you needed the aid of a witch?”

The woman flung the door open, her eyes lighting up even in the dimness of the torches. She studied Sansa. “Jeyne, right? You helped us when our dog Ruth here gave birth to her pups.” The woman gave Sansa a hopeful grin – as if to say: If you could help Ruth, then please help our child.

Thankfully Sansa was too caught up on their misstep to let the weight of their hope crush her own. Jeyne? But we look nothing ali– Oh. Sansa combed free the knots in her hair from the flight, resetting the braid as she corrected the family. “No, I think you’ve mistaken me for another witch. I’m Sansa.”

“Oh! Our apologies. M’lady,” the woman added, moving aside for Sansa to enter. Sansa shucked off the hood of her cloak, but decided to keep it on. It was cold inside, even with the fire in
the center of the room. Would they survive the rest of the season? “I’m Elyse, and my husband, Martyn. We cannot thank you enough for comin’ this late, m’lady.”

“It’s not a problem,” Sansa said. Another smile, even if what she wanted most desperately right now was the warmth of her furs and the familiar brush of wind against her window.

Elyse smiled back, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. But beneath it: Sansa could see the fear remained. “Good, good. Little Jon is back here, been sick for...for too long.”

They led Sansa towards the back of the two room house, passing Alesan and Sofie and the dog, all of whom sat huddled beneath a thin blanket beside the fire. They stared up at Sansa as she passed. She saw the same look in the children – the shred of hope. Sansa might not be proficient in creatures (or people), and Sansa might not have been the girl who helped Ruth (the dog slowly licked its muzzle, deciding Sansa wasn’t a threat). But a witch was a witch, and a sick boy was only slightly different to a sick cow or pig. Or from a field of ill-weathered crops. Right?

Still, Sansa was all this family had. She had to save the boy.

“Here’s our Jon, m’lady,” Elyse said, drawing a curtain that separated the children’s beds from one another, even though there was maybe an inch between the frames. Because all of the beds had been pushed together to make room for a fire beside Jon’s. And it looked like half the blankets in had been piled on top of this one, with a shivering mop of hair peeking out beneath it.

“Oh!” Martyn said, startling both Elyse and Sansa. “Apologies, m’lady witch. Uh, uh, would you care for somethin’ to drink? To eat? We don’t have much, but it’s the leas’ we can do.”

Sansa shook her head. She couldn’t imagine taking what little they had. Besides, her appetite was still missing. “No, I’m fine. But thank you for your hospitality. What you can give me is how your son fell sick. And for how long, and what’s happened since. The more information, the better.”

So they told Sansa that Jon had been as strong and healthy as the other two children – Sofie and Alesan – two weeks ago. He was the middle child, but just as willing to help tend to the animals or the crops. He would make a fine husband, the mother said wistfully. Even with the onslaught of snow, Jon didn’t stop. And then: the storm raged harder. And the storm wouldn’t stop. And Jon had been protecting their crops from pest and frost, left early in the morning, and hadn’t come back. Martyn combed through the lines of potatoes and cabbages for hours in the waning moonlight, Ruth at his side. Martyn swore he saw shadows in the night, but swore harder he wouldn’t stop looking for his son. It was late – so late – when they found Jon. Huddled up beneath the potatoes, lips blue, and shivering. Day and night they kept the fire in the bedroom stoked. They piled on their blankets, even their own. They prayed to every god they knew. Please wake up, they asked. Please save our boy. Day and night and day and night. They couldn’t brave the storm to Helgen to send word for help, not when they couldn’t say for certain that they would make it there through the inches of snow piling the ground. So they sat, and waited, and prayed. And then they lucked out when a traveling merchant stopped by one night in the middle of the storm, offering them bits of cured meat and beer from his wares in exchange for shelter from the snow and wind. The merchant promised to pass on word that there was a boy needing a witch’s help. And should the merchant ever stop by this farmstead again, well, Martyn and Elyse would offer all they had for that kind man’s help in saving their son.

But would they be so kind should Sansa fail, she wondered.

“I see,” she said when they had finished.
“Will Jon be alright?”

It wasn’t Martyn or Elyse who spoke, but the smallest child, Alesan. Both of the kids who’d been singing and prancing outside were now peering between their parents’ legs and the door.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help him,” Sansa promised.

Because promising *Yes, he’ll be okay, yes he’ll make it*, wasn’t something Sansa *could* make good on. The whole family took it to mean that, though, from the way they all sighed in relief and wished her their thanks. Martyn added another log to the fire before leaving Sansa alone.

*I have a half-brother Jon, too*, she thought as she stared at the bit of his head that peeked from beneath the blankets. She wondered what he was doing now, if he had been caught in a worse storm further north. If he was even still alive – they hadn’t heard from him in a year. And now with the unrelenting storm, the troubles plaguing crop and livestock, the ice bears wandering through forests – *They aren’t real*, she told herself – was Jon still alive? Or, would he be by the season’s end?

Sansa shook her head. Positive thoughts. “How are you feeling, Jon?”

Jon didn’t answer.

She examined him, tried to remember all of her lessons from Old Nan. To remember all of the trips she took with Jeyne to tend on sick animals, or the trips with her other witches. Humans and animals might be very different from crops, but the method was the same. Identify the problem, and fix it. (If only it were that easy).

Jon’s breathing was very prolonged. His chest hardly moved (if she didn’t know better, Sansa would think him dead already. But she *did* know better, and shoved away those horrid thoughts). There was a pulse – so faint, no more than ten beats in a minute – in his wrist.

“You’re going to be okay,” she told him, hoping that he could hear her. Hoping that he could grab hold of her words, and pull himself free.

Sansa stared longest at his lips, cracked and blue, the faintest whisper of breath passing between them. She snaked her hand beneath the blankets, feeling for his heart beat. Eked a wisp of her magic from her fingertips into his heart. It recoiled against the warmth of her touch. Not quite like she was restarting his heart (she had seen people saved that way, a quick jolt of magic just before the brain suffocates. Those saved spoke of myriad of things they saw in those seconds of death: of bright lights welcoming them on, of being stuck in pitch-darkness. No two stories aligned).

This wasn’t that, though. Jon was very much alive, though faint. His heart worked, but just barely. Like there was a hand of ice around it, squeezing it until it was barely a living thing.

Before she returned to her body, Sansa flushed excess magic throughout Jon’s veins, hoping to warm him from the inside out. Hoping to thaw through the clutch of ice.

She worked quickly after that, even as sleep tempted her. Shucking off her cloak and using it to organize the herbs and ingredients necessary. Grinding nettle, elderberry, ginger, lemon zest, and a few pinches of other things she’d brought north from Highgarden into a fine powder. Mixing them with honeyed water warmed from the fire beside her. Imbuing the mixture with as much of her latent magic she was willing to sacrifice (in the haze of her sleepiness and guilt, she parted ways with more of her magic then safe. Old Nan definitely would have scolded her, but Old Nan wasn’t here for that). It took an hour to prepare, and Sansa wasn’t sure if someone had called her in that time or not.
Nothing existed for a long time except the movement of her hands or the soft crackle of the fire.

But she finished it. Swirled the thick liquid in its vial, a ruddy green color with gold specks and a warm scent. Against the flickering flames, it transformed into the rolling hills of Highgarden, the depthless springs hidden away in forests and mountains. It would taste like the first bite of crisp apples or the wafting scent of lemons or the welcoming heat of the sun cresting over mountains in the soft light of dawn.

The essence of Summer.

Not something Olenna or Old Nan or any other witch had shown her, though remedies for colds were one of the first things she learned. A thing wrought from Sansa’s own mind. Because that’s what being a witch meant, when it came to situations like this. Adapting, figuring out what the root of the sickness was, and countering it with its opposite. And the opposite of Winter…

A flash of red against shadows in a copse of trees lit by silvery moonlight.

Sansa called for Martyn, the only person left awake in the other room. It was then she realized then it must have been at least midnight from the slant of the moon through the window, but no one else was in the bedroom. Were they waiting for her, giving her room? Afraid that their presence would ruin the witchy process of healing? That the thin hope would break? She had been biting her lip (almost hard enough to tear skin) when Martyn appeared. Sansa pulled her smile back on. “Would you mind helping me feed this medicine to Jon?”

Martyn agreed, tilting back Jon’s head as Sansa carefully spooned the mixture down the boy’s throat. She showed him how to maneuver the head to make sure the medicine went down and not pool at the back of the throat (and choke him before it had a chance to work).

When they finished, they stared at Jon. At the slow (way too slow) movement of the blankets above him. Listened to the crackle of the fire, the howl of the wind. One of the windows wasn’t set right, letting in a sharp whistle when the winds blew just right.

“It’s… it’s the cold,” the father finally said, breaking the silence. He wrung the bottom of his shirt into a knot. “He’d been fine if it ain’t so cold this year… He’d gone to check on the ‘taters before. He’d been fine. But the cold, it…”

Sansa bit her bottom lip, hard enough that she tasted metal. The cold was her fault. Jon being sick was her fault. All of it and everything. “We will see if he feels better comes sunrise,” she said, fighting back against her thoughts.

Martyn gripped her arm. “Will you stay, m’lady?”

Sansa wished in the deepest part of her heart to go. To just...leave and assume everything went alright. Ignorance was a heady drug, after all. But this late, with much of her magic used and not a wink of sleep in, well, too long. Staying would be safer than trying to brave the flight back to Winterfell without falling asleep. Rosmarie did that a few years ago. Plummeted straight to her death. “Yes, of course.”

Martyn glanced between the lump of blankets that was his son, and Sansa. Nodded. Mumbled Good, good, before remembering his manners. “Do you need a bed to sleep, m’lady? You’re welcome to use ours, or I can get—”

“No, it’s fine.” Sansa interrupted. “I’d like to keep an eye on Jon during the night, so a chair will be fine.”
He nodded, getting her a chair and an old shirt as a cushion. Martyn stood at the foot of the bed awkwardly, not at all sure what he should do. Not at all happy with the waiting. After a minute, he nodded a Good, good again and left.

Part of Sansa wished the family was in the room with her, to keep her company. But part of her was glad for the silence. “You’re going to be okay,” she whispered again. Stroked the mop of Jon’s hair to the side. Please be okay.

She gripped the boy’s hand beneath the cover, willing her own warmth into his body. Let threads of her magic work through the veins again, around his heart. The magic would work. Her potion would work.

It would.

She listened to the sounds of the rest of the family outside, the kids already asleep. Martyn must have woken up Elyse, and they were speaking in hushed tones. About their hope, about the future for Jon, about the biting storm that was on the verge of whipping into a frenzy again. About their crops, their animals. About all of the things they would do when summer came again.

Sansa blinked.

The farmhouse was quiet. Someone was quietly snoring in the next room. It could have been the dog, for all she knew. She told herself to reach back and add more wood to the fire, but she couldn’t find the energy for it. Could barely find the energy to keep her eyelids open. She was still holding Jon’s hand – and it was still cold.

Sansa blinked.

She saw the moon, the cloudless sky that it hung in. Stars splattered against the blackness above. There were trees – so many trees – stretching far into the distance, that Sansa might have thought the world to be a sea of them below with the glittering stars above. Except the trees were blanketed in snow. The ground, too, pure snow. Specks flying past her, and though she couldn’t see them, she knew, felt, the way her face was etched on every single one. She turned, and saw white: towering, glittering silver and blue from the moon. Reaching up towards the stars and the heavens beyond. And she knew, felt, too, that it wouldn’t last.

Sansa blinked.

And everything was dark.

* * *

There was no cacophony of birdsong to lull her awake. No rush of sweet smells to taunt her nose. No rapping at her door, or yelling, or the sounds of horses readied for another hunt. There was only the wind.

Sansa hadn’t meant to fall asleep. But gods if she didn’t want to close her eyes again and let sleepiness drag her all the way down.

Sansa could heard Alesan and Sofie singing in the other room, that same poem they sung yesterday. Ruth must have been outside, barking after some brave bird that chanced to weather the storm. And above all that: the wind, knocking softly on the walls. If Sansa listened close enough, she could hear him calling for her, looking for her. Where are you, he asked. Come back to me, he pleaded.
“He’s…?”

She startled at the noise. Martyn and Elyse stood over their son on the other side of the bed. They must have fed the fire – it was crackling loudly, so hot Sansa felt beads of sweat dance down her spine.

She looked at Jon then. At the veins of his eyelids. At the dark blue of his lips. At the wild mop of his hair – like Bran’s or Rickon’s or even Arya’s, like someone had mussed it on their way to the kitchens. Like someone had ran through it with love.

Sansa squeezed his hand still in hers. It was cold. So cold.

*Please.*

“He’s…” it was Elyse that said it. The word barely distinguished from the choke that swallowed her voice, or the tears that began streaming down cheeks.

*Please.*

Nobody said it, because saying it would make it absolutely finite. Because *not* saying it meant that there was a sliver – however tiny – that the truth wasn’t real.

*He’s dead.*

She clenched her free fist, wished that the nails would break her skin (as a *punishment* for what she couldn’t do). Fought back against the tightening in her own throat. It felt like someone was squeezing her neck, her chest. Maybe even reached between her ribs to clutch at her heart with fingers of ice. “Perhaps if, if we had been able to treat Jon before the sickness got too bad…” she began, but couldn’t bring herself to finish the thought. That was a *terrible* thing to say. Placing the blame on someone else. But worse was the moment of *relief* it brought her. The moment of: *this wasn’t your fault.*

Oh, but wasn’t it?

“I’m sorry,” Sansa said, blinking back her own tears. “I’m so sorry. I did all that I could, but…”

“It’s the cold,” Martyn said again through his wife’s sobs, wiping tears from his eyes.

Sansa didn’t say anything because she knew all of the guilt would fall out if she opened her mouth. *It’s my fault your son died it’s my fault my fault—*

So she only nodded, picked up her things, and left. She realized she forgot to tell them to burn Jon’s body, but they would know. They had to have been preparing for this for days now. They had to *know* (in the blackest part of their hearts where the shadows lingered) that Jon wouldn’t survive. And yet – here was Sansa, giving them the briefest glimmer of hope that yes, maybe their son wouldn’t die. That they would have these wonderful memories come sunrise. That they hadn’t just lost a child.

It would have been so much better if she hadn’t come.

*It was the cold.*

It *was* the cold. But, it wasn’t *just* the cold. It was *everything* since she got back. The dance, the fear in smallfolk’s eyes as they had to harvest weeks earlier than they should, with barely a
fraction of the crops they needed. The animals – and children – who didn’t survive, couldn’t survive.

_It’s not your fault_. Sansa desperately wanted Old Nan to tell her that, _anyone_ to tell her that. To tell her that, yes she royally screwed up, but she was okay.

Sansa couldn’t help but ask, her voice barely above a whisper: “Am I a bad witch?”

Old Nan once said to Sansa that the difference between a good witch and a bad witch was how they used their magic. The obvious: good witches help with animals and families and the humdrum of life; bad witches lure children with candies through forests, break apart marriages, eat babes fresh from mother’s breasts.

Where did Sansa lie on that black-and-white scale of goodness? Did all of the families she _did_ help outweigh the child she couldn’t save? Did all of the crops she save outweigh the ones she couldn’t, to the sobs of the families knowing they wouldn’t have enough to eat? Did all of that cancel out the bad?

_You’re not a bad witch_ , she wanted someone to tell her.

Except Sansa was alone on the steps of a farmhouse, staring out into the bleak whiteness of the world she wrought. The silence a deafening buzz against the own silence in her chest. There wasn’t anyone to assuage her fears, there wasn’t anyone to condemn her.

That boy’s death was damning enough.

_I need to go back_.

Back to Winterfell, or back to before Sansa messed everything up? Oh, if only.

She stared at the lump of the snowman standing proud in the morning sun. One of the eyes had fallen out, the makeshift hat, too. But the lopsided smile remained.

She stepped onto the snow – no roses sprung around her feet. No falling snowflakes proclaiming love or admiration or any silly thing. No witty old witch to tell her that everything, eventually, would be okay.

She truly was alone.

Sansa touched her mother’s pin, the cold burning her fingertips. She wished the cold would burn her completely.
the hunt

Chapter Notes

[A millions thanks and hugs to all of you for reading this! :) I’m really excited about this story, and I’m so happy that you guys are loving it as much as I am writing it!! I’m really excited with how this chapter came out, and I hope you guys like it!!! :D]

“You never did tell me why you dyed your hair?”

Sansa dragged her gaze from the relentless white outside the dining hall’s windows. Blinked, again, until the grey stones and flickering candlelight came into focus. Then the tables, the cutlery, the knots in the woods. Blinked again. A flash of blue lips, pale skin. The pained expression of father and mother holding back their tears as they stared at their lifeless son. A sharp claw grabbed at her heart between her ribs and squeezed – she gasped a breath. “Sorry, it’s cold,” Sansa faked a cough, by way of excusing the emptiness that ate at her. “I just, thought it’d be a nice change. You look pretty with brown hair, I thought I might, too?”

“Please.” Jeyne pouted into her porridge (it was more water than porridge, the need to conserve resources for a storm that didn’t look like it was ending anytime soon. Lord Stark was a careful man. Even with the vast stores – no one knew if they would run out. Or when). Her lie was thinner than the porridge was. “If anything, you’re making me look worse.”

Sansa tried to laugh at it, but the mirth wouldn’t come. Hadn’t come in days now. There was undeniable guilt eating away Sansa from the inside, and every now and then she found herself wishing the monster would consume her entirely. She shook her head and the thought. The thought that whispered the solitude of darkness more often, with the storm unrelenting.

Jeyne was her friend – arguably, more a sister than Arya was sometimes – yet Sansa couldn’t bring herself to tell the truth. Which was: I danced with the god of Winter, and now animals and people and children are dying because of me. Oh, and he probably loves me, and is showing it through this storm. So I’m hiding here with brown hair and hoping he might forget about the girl who danced with him.

If she wasn’t so terrified, maybe Sansa could confront Winter himself. And do what? Tell him Stop. As if Winter was Bran or Rickon (or even Arya) whose lips and tongue were tinged like the rainbow of sweets Sansa chided them for eating. No. What good would a Stop do to a being that willed nature with a flick of fingers, or a thump in his heart (assuming he had one).

She wasn’t sure about that. Whether gods had hearts.

She wasn’t sure what was happening to hers.

“You’d think you’ve gone as mad as your aunt.”

Sansa pushed at the chunks of vegetables and meat in her porridge. “Have you seen her
recently?”

Jeyne shrugged, strands of her brown hair falling from her shoulders. She pushed her porridge away, finding more interest in tearing at the crust of the hard chunk of bread. “Not in a long time. I imagine she’s just as unwell, though. You’d need to ask the witches who tend to the Vale, though, if you’re curious?”

“Hm,” Sansa watched Jeyne’s fingers pick at the bread. “Perhaps I’ll send a raven.” She wasn’t curious, not in truth. Lysa Arryn was... an interesting woman, to put it simply. Sansa hadn’t seen her aunt since before her mother died. They traveled as a family a few times to the Vale during the early summer seasons (when the mountains weren’t encased in ice). And last Sansa saw of her aunt, the woman was full with little Robert. Then Catelyn Stark succumbed to the cold of winter, and that was the last time Lysa stepped foot in the North. She’d been furious, Sansa remembered. Lysa had stormed into Eddard’s study and the door hadn’t closed properly. There was doubt in little Sansa’s mind and heart as she tried to make sense of Lysa’s anger. Or Catelyn’s death.

Lysa stormed out of Winterfell, alone save for the babe in her womb. Witches gossiped that she locked herself in the castle of the Vale, not coming down even during the harshest of winter storms. As a punishment, some girls whispered. Or just because she was incredibly, incredibly unwell.

“How are the horses faring?” Sansa asked to take her mind off her aunt.

A light flickered behind Jeyne’s eyes. She was glad for the change in topic, too. “Much better. Only one stallion passed, an older one. His time was nearing, true, though Ser Hallis had been hoping to have Quynn’s last ride out in the fields during summer, not...this.”

The hand wrapped around Sansa’s heart squeezed tighter.

“But aside from Quynn, thankfully the other horses survived. Frostfire’s leg healed, thank the Seven. Hullen was worried for her. But now we just need to keep the stables warm for them for the rest of winter.”

“That’s good.”

Jeyne nodded.

Something whacked into the back of Sansa’s head, enough to leave a dull thud at the corner of her skull. She

Arya was beaming from the other side of the hall. “Got’cha!” she called out.

“Arya!” Sansa fished for the offending projectile – another lump of the same hard bread – and aimed for her sister. Arya was too nimble (as always), though it was luck Sansa hadn’t gone completely off-course and smacked some unfortunate bannerman. The Great Hall was empty, in between meals as it was. The bread skipped off a table and fell into the unknown.

“Come on, Sans! You got to try!” Arya laughed, smiling all the while. “Oh! That’s right. Father is looking for you.”

Tighter the hand wrapped inside her ribs. Sansa half-wished the bread had knocked her unconscious.

“Thank you,” she said to Arya, who ducked beneath the trestle tables for her projectile (a prayer for whoever she decided to throw it at at full strength). To Jeyne, Sansa said, “I’ll be seeing
you at Winter Town later?”

Jeyne was nearly finished picking the crust off. “I hope, unless someone else has a pregnant horse or cow this season.”

“I rather thought you liked it?”

Jeyne shrugged, setting the peeled bread down on her plate, wiping crumbs from her fingers, her skirts. “Yes, when it isn’t so gods-damned cold…”

Sansa didn’t have a response for that. She merely nodded and left.

The halls were warmed from the hot springs as Sansa made her way to her father’s study. She said her pleasantries to any serving hands she met on the way, as was expected of her. Though she was glad the journey (however short it might have been) was empty enough that Sansa didn’t have to contort her face too often. She rather

The heavy oaken doors were ajar when Sansa approached, knocked. “Come in,” came the heavy timbre of her father beyond.

“How was the Wall? Are the knights well?” Sansa asked by means of introducing herself, sliding between the doors. And the knights were just as good fodder as any. Eddard Stark had left the morning after Sansa had dyed her hair (she told herself it was a coincidence, nothing more). Every year, Lord Stark sent a band of his knights with a train laden with supplies in tow up the Kingsroad, visiting the farmsteads and villages along the way. Robb had personally gone out – and last Sansa heard, he was dealing with a group of bandits near Last Hearth. And along with that, Eddard went to visit the Wall at the onset of winter himself, to check on the training and reports of the wildlings. A lot of the politics there was ‘we’ll leave you alone if you leave us alone’. Ten years ago, Lord Stark gave them the northernmost farmsteads, north of Last Hearth and south of the Wall. The smallfolk nearest were affronted, but the wildlings proved themselves decent enough with farming – they were much better at hunting the bears and moose that once ravaged livestock. So the smallfolk grudgingly accept the wildlings.

And now with the heavy snows, the Kingsroad would be blocked entirely to horses in a scant few weeks. Or maybe days.

Eddard was deep in concentration, going over lists brought back from the Wall (of supplies, perhaps. Or a tally of which of his men didn’t make it. Sansa did her best not to look away). Her father only said, “They are doing well. The storms is harsh, but the men have seen harsher.” A pregnant minute passed as he flipped through the layers of parchment. There was no expression on his face as he read the lists.

“Some of the men haven’t made it, some of the Free Folk, too.” Her father looked up at her finally. Words caught in his throat, the bridge between his eyes furrowed, as he tried to make sense of the (not-quite) sudden change in his daughter’s appearance. Or perhaps questioning whether or not the right daughter was standing before him.

She dug her fingers into the hem of her woolen skirt. Sansa pushed ahead before her father could ask, too uncertain about the certain onslaught of questions. Because if he asked the truth – the real truth, not the blatant lies she’d fed her fellow witches or her siblings – well, Sansa wasn’t sure if she would be able to hold back. And if Eddard Stark found the culprit of the raging storms, the culprit of all the animals who perished, all the knights and the little children...Sansa’s stomach felt as temperamental as the snows blowing against the tower’s walls. “The farms and families have been doing well down here. Though the storm has proven difficult in many homesteads. Still, the North is
strong, and I’m sure we’ll all get through it to see Summer again.” A false smile. It did nothing to quench the fluttering inside her.

Slowly, Eddard nodded. “I see.” A report typically given by Old Nan (who should be arriving from White Harbor this afternoon).

Sansa didn’t want to ask, but she had to. “Arya says you called for me?”

*Did you find out when you were up at the Wall, who the culprit was for the storm? Did you find out in the lifeless eyes of the nameless children I’ve murdered?*

Eddard nodded, though his (confused) gaze remained stroking the chestnut curls of her hair. “Yes. I was wondering whether you knew when Old Nan was returning? I’ve an... errand to discuss with her.”

*Oh.* “Yes. She went to deal with the Manderlys, they sent a raven yesterday. She said she would return this afternoon.”

Sansa could see as much as she could feel the infinite number of questions roiling inside her father’s head. His fingers tapped on the scrolls before him, a scratchy whisper against the wind outside. “Sansa, do you—"

“I’m—" she cut in. She shouldn’t have (how rude of you), but the fear of what he was going to ask – whatever he was going to ask – was too much. “I’m to do some research in the library. For when Old Nan returns. For her.” Sansa waited for a dismissal (she didn’t need one necessarily, she was a witch and the daughter of the lord. But still. Something kept her glued there).

Her father only stared at the curls of chestnut that once transformed sunlight into rich golds and coppers. She had the feeling this was the first time in a long while her father looked at her. Like he wasn’t ashamed.

Eddard nodded. “I won’t keep you then.”

Sansa nodded back. Spun on her heels, and left.

* * *

The climb up the Library Tower was treacherous, to say the least. The winding staircase hugging the exterior wall was slippery from frost, and Sansa had to clutch tightly to the handholds embedded in the stonework to keep from sliding down to the bottom. Or worse: from slipping off the edge to the snow-packed courtyard below. The guard at the base of the tower warned Sansa of the climb, even offered to go and fetch whatever books or scrolls she needed for her. Sansa politely declined the offer – it wasn’t the books or the knowledge, necessarily; it was the solitude. The knowing fact that no one foolish enough would brave the stairs to the library when the snows were this thick.

A good thing she already proved herself a fool. Many, many times.

Sansa was out of breath by the time she closed the door behind her. Leaning against the cold wood, she watched the faint puffs of breath escape her lips. The walls were thick, but the air was frigid and stale. No one came up to the library in winter unless they absolutely had to. Even Maester Luwin avoided it, preferring to send up the guards and only if he was desperate for a scroll. The maester had his own borrowed library in his rooms. As did Sansa, albeit smaller. Old Nan gave her a book that a friend of hers once cherished – before the Dragons had her burned alive.
Whilst she caught her breath, Sansa couldn’t help but remember the last time she was leaning against a door, hiding from the clutches of cold and snow. It had been a dream, but gods if it hadn’t felt real. If she closed her eyes, she could hear the crackling of the fires in the lanterns, the clacking of the sticks and the stomping of feet as the dancers twirled round and round.

And beneath all of that, traveling on the wind like a raven might, Sansa couldn’t help but wonder if it was her name on the breeze.

*Of course not.*

She shivered. Lit one of the many lanterns lying by the door for visitors, not bothering to light the others placed around the edge of the room. The harsh whiteness filtering in through paned windows was enough.

Oranges and yellows flickered against book spines and in the curled crevices of parchments as Sansa wandered through the shelves. There were three levels to the Library Tower, with the only access from the door on the third. The further down one went into the bowels, the longer the shadows grew between shelves; the heavier the air, too-long confined. Sansa let her fingers trail across leather and wood and stone as she had no particular destination in mind. It was the abundance of quiet that she yearned for. The comforting, crushing weight of silence.

Though, that would be a lie to say she had no destination. Sansa had visited the Library Tower often these past weeks, and not just because no one else was fool enough to brave the slippery slope. But she remembered – as a witchling, devouring everything and anything about nature and its wiles at the hands of gods – those stories she once came back to time and again.

Her fingers found the familiar spine, tugging it free from its neighbors. It thumped on the reading desk, dust spiraling into the air. The title was simply *The Old Gods*, the golden lettering cracked but glittering in the lantern-light. The leather was soft as she cracked the book open.

It was generations of accounts written in an ensemble of hands, sketches and painted illustrations depicting the various forms of the gods. A chunk of pages in the very back were blank, as if waiting for someone to fill them all these years. This was one of the few books of the old days that survived the fires. Most books in Winterfell, did – but not all. Just like the witches.

Sansa had flicked through these exact pages when she had been learning. And revisited them shortly after the dance.

Here: the changing of seasons, written in a shaking hand. She could almost see the gnarls of wrinkles as the person wrote the accounts. The edges of the letters flaked as Sansa ran her fingers beneath, following the archaic spelling. Some of it translated to the modern tongue, but too much of it left Sansa filling in the blanks. Still, it was a story she knew by heart from the tales Old Nan would weave when Sansa was still a babe.

The letters were fading, but the colors remained. Almost as bright as the first day they were painted on the parchment. Sansa ran her finger along the silhouette of the first picture: Summer was painfully beautiful. Milk-white skin; hair of gold and red and orange like the sunsets that turned the whole world momentarily into a fantasy; and eyes both as green as spring leaves, and as blue as the rivers meandering through Highgarden. She blessed the farmers’ harvests, called winds to blow back against the frigid snows of the past season. Sansa loved most the depiction of Summer dancing on a lake, surrounded by bountiful trees, and nature – deer and wolves and rabbits – standing bowed, transfixed by the wonder of Summer.

Sansa’s fingers were caught stroking the god’s hair. *So much like mine.*
There were nearly a dozen depictions of Summer in the pages that detailed the changing of seasons. Each of an unearthly beautiful woman with sunsets in her hair and crops springing from her feet. But Winter… Sansa flipped a page: that same lake, frozen over; the same trees once heavy with fruits, barren; the animals long skittered away. There was nothing but nothing in the picture save for darkness and ice. And each depiction of Summer that was full of harvest and warmth and love – there was an equally lifeless illustration. As if it was nothing and everything. All the world’s fears. Death itself. There was no picture of Winter that didn’t send shivers down Sansa’s spine.

She couldn’t help but wonder at the monster that lurked beneath the shadows and snow.

A monster that Sansa – unknowingly – bewitched.

“There you are.”

Sansa jumped.

In the haze of her research, she could have sworn it was Winter who called to her: there you are. Could have sworn he was relentlessly looking for her, waiting for her.

It was only Jeyne, though. She skipped over a pile of books lying beside the shelves, lantern swinging in her hand. Her nose and ears were bright pink from the cold. “I’ve been looking all over for you. Lucky the guard outside was kind enough to tell me you were up here.” Jeyne gave her an awkward smile that asked: why exactly are you up here? Only she was kind enough not to pry. “Supposed to go to Winter Town tonight. Remember?”

“Right, right! I’m so sorry, I got carried away.”

“Reading dusty old books?” Jeyne didn’t make a motion to pull the tome from where it sat on the desk. But Sansa couldn’t ignore the way her friend’s gaze was intently focused on making sense of the piles that sat beside Sansa. And on the picture of emptiness, darkness, winter. Her only companion in the cramped tower, aside from the flickering candles and the howling wind.

“Just…curious, is all,” Sansa answered, slowly and covertly moving to hide the book from view.

But it was no use. Jeyne didn’t tear her eyes from the illustration. Lowered her voice, as if perhaps she thought he might hear: “Does it…does it say how to end this?”

This being the horrid storm. This being the foot of snow that fell every few days, the onslaught of ice and cold and death.

This being the end of the world.

Sansa carefully shut the book and stacked it on the pile with all the others. Shook her head. “I’m afraid not. The writing is too old to make sense of much of it, anyhow. I think…” she licked her lips. “I think we just need to be brave and wait it out.”

Her friend was visibly disappointed, but nodded. At the least, it was better than the possibility (of which Sansa let linger longer and longer as the days and the storm passed by) that maybe, maybe, Winter would ease his snow if she loved him back.

As if. It was the voice of Old Nan in her mind, searing as ever.

“Ready?” Sansa asked. They climbed the stairs up and the stairs down, careful not to slip. The guard wished them good afternoon.
There was a cluster of witches in the courtyard, most Sansa recognized. There was a new witch, so young with cheeks as pink as the bobble on her knit cap. Her stave truly was a broom.

Sansa turned to Jeyne, confused. This was too many witches for anything. If she didn’t know better, she’d think this was all the witches in the North. “Where is it we’re going, exactly?”

Jeyne shrugged. “I’m not sure. Old Nan passed me when she landed and told me to find you. I thought she meant for Winter Town. But then Eryn flew in, and I thought ‘Oh might be something we need help with’. I imagine – I hope? – it isn’t anything bad, since she didn’t give me that look.” She imitated it – eyes bugging, mouth a thin frown. Jeyne went so far as to wrap her scarf around like a shawl and hunch over.

Sansa couldn’t deny the prick of laughter that rolled in her stomach. “I suppose whatever this is is better than your gods-awful impression.”

“Hey!” She hunched down further, nearly tripping beneath the angle. “I think I do a rather fine impression of– Oh shoot.”

Sansa turned just as Jeyne stood ramrod straight, throwing the scarf off her hair. Strands flew in the breeze.

Old Nan walked through the courtyard towards them, and as if on cue, every other witch grew quiet. They could ridicule the old woman all they want (and she often gave back as good as she got), but that look was etched deep onto her face.

Worse, though, was the expression Eddard Stark wore.

“What’s this?” Silgard piped up. Everyone stared at her like she was mad.

Old Nan sighed, a long, deep thing. “Good to see you all got my ravens this morning. Rather last minute, I know, but I’m sure you’ll understand why shortly.”

So that’s why they’re all here – they were called.

Why?

Old Nan chimed in with the details that Eddard must have divulged to her just before she sent Jeyne to round up everyone. That though the bandits were mostly run off by Robb and his company (and by the wildlings, who had no qualms in chasing off thieves), there was something else save for the storms that was taking both lives and supplies. She didn’t go into the details, because there weren’t details to be had. Knights or smallfolk disappeared, and if their friends or family were lucky, they would find them in the woods days later beneath a foot of snow. And if they were extremely lucky, the scavenging wolves wouldn’t have eaten them.

Someone said, “We ain’t a party of knights, though…”

“I’m sure you will be able to solve whatever has been plaguing the North,” Lord Stark said, gazing over each of them in turn. He wasn’t looking at any of them, really. Like he didn’t want to be here. Not here, in the courtyard, surrounded by inches of snow and a slew of witches. But here, asking witches for help. Sansa couldn’t help but wonder how awful those reports had been for her father to essentially beg witches for help.

It was also something Old Nan must have been anticipating, if she sent word to the witches before Eddard called for her.
Sansa wished she was anywhere but here.

Old Nan finished, waving away Eddard like he was a messenger boy. She tapped the end of her stave deep into the snow until it whack ed against the dirt far beneath. The crack echoed throughout the courtyard; Sansa felt it reverberate in her chest. “We’d best hurry. It’ll be dark soon.”

* * *

The snow was thicker up North.

The lake surrounding Queenscrown was frozen solid. The tower was empty, had been empty for years save for the wandering bandit or squatter. There was a deserted inn on the edge of the lake facing the tower, and beyond that small farmsteads whose roofs and windows were caved in. The trees surrounding the lake varied between thinning leaves to no leaves at all. In the late afternoon light, the merlons of Queenscrown glittered gold.

Sansa had only ever ventured as far as Last Hearth, being that very few people lived north of it. Some who were brave or unable to travel south, and the wildlings who made home in the Gift – but Silgard or Maege were called in for those problems. Jeyne said she’d been up to the Gift once, and that was with a band of Northern men. The wildlings weren’t as wild as she was afraid, but that didn’t stop Jeyne from keeping knights with her at all times.

Sansa much preferred staying south of Winterfell, though Bear Island was a nice respite from the mainland. She wondered how little Lyanna was faring with the storms.

Looking north, she could see the towering line of the Wall, solid and white and imposing on the horizon. As if the world just ended there.

“It’s as cold as Winter’s balls,” Silgard swore. Sansa turned from the Wall to look at the witches, clutching their cloaks close to them. Anya had wits at least to keep a stock of warmth tonics, of which she shared with the rest of the witches when they stepped off their staves onto the snow. It helped warm Sansa from the inside, like she was constantly drinking a just-brewed cup of tea, or a just-poured bowl of soup. The tonic didn’t stop the actual cold – the wind that snaked beneath cracks of clothing, that summoned goose pimples across every inch of flesh. At least Sansa didn’t feel like her fingers were numb, about to fall as dead weight in her gloves.

She remembered the absolute fear in that farmer’s face when he spoke of imagined creatures made of ice. Was that what they were dealing with? An army of... frozen beasts?

Sansa wanted to be anywhere else but here right now.

They split up in two groups of five: Sansa, Jeyne, Anya, Silgard, and Mariya wandered the west of Queenscrown through the forests, whilst Old Nan, Eryn, Maege, Wylla, and Maryah looked through the abandoned village.

“What’re we lookin’ for, anyways?” Anya piped up from behind. They’d barely been walking ten minutes.


“Hm,” Anya replied, uninterested. Far more interested in getting behind walls at Last Hearth. Because there was no way they’d be able to make it back to Winterfell during the night.

The reports Eddard received (as Old Nan mentioned when they landed, too focused on flying north that no one would have been able to hear a word against the wind) weren’t awful, but
they weren’t great. The last sighting had been here in Queenscrown, and that was one of the men who went north with Eddard didn’t come south with him. News of the disappearances and deaths as south as Last Hearth made it much more of an issue than if it was something contained just in one area, like the bandits. But between the Wall and Last Hearth was two hundred miles.

And in those two hundred miles was...who knew.

There wasn’t much of out of the ordinary in the forests. Trees, bushes, bugs, snow. Pinecones were too soggy to crunch beneath their boots as they walked. The snow was fresh.

Silgard groaned behind her. “Gods, I can’t wait to get to Last Hearth. Some fire and food.”

“That’s all?” Anya piped up. “I’m sure you’re well intimated with the knights patrolling Last Hearth.”

“You bitch,” Silgard said with a laugh.

Sansa listened to the witches bicker and laugh behind her. Mariya (not to be confused with Maryah) tried to pipe in every now and then, but she was too young to understand the fervor that boiled between the witches. At least, Sansa hoped Mariya knew nothing personal. Jeyne said the little witch was fond of animals, and was often paired with her. Jeyne didn’t mind, though the girl was far too bookish. “Like you.” Sansa did her best to pretend like she didn’t hear that.

There was little sign of life this far North. Anya jumped when a rabbit rushed between trees, and she couldn’t live it down from Silgard. Mariya meanwhile tried to chase after it before Sansa called her back.

The sun was transforming the snow gold when they decided to turn towards Queenscrown. They made a loop of it, going from the west up along the trees towards the north. They were half a mile deep in the forest, with the massive structure of Queenscrown in sight on their right at all times. And for all the miles they walked: nothing. Mariya wondered whether if it would have been better to been on their staves, and they would have had they not spent hours at high speeds flying the hundreds of miles. It felt good to just walk.

There was nothing but the crunch of snow beneath them for a long while. The wind had stopped howling for an hour, snowflakes light flutters. The warmth of the tonic was starting to wear off, and Sansa was looking south towards the warm bed and food that awaited them at Last Hearth – after they flew there. She would have been content with camping in Queenscrown if it meant no more flying for a while.

“Shite.”

Sansa spun on her heels (which was difficult in all the snow). It wasn’t the sudden swear when the rabbit jumped from a bush. That single word echoed in the stillness, and froze blood.

It was a mercy Sansa’s paltry breakfast didn’t make a second appearance.

This was too far south for it to have been a knight from the Wall. And just enough south for it not to be a wildling. It wasn’t someone Sansa recognized, but not because she didn’t intimately know each Northman by name.

It was because the man’s face had been bitten clean off.

Silgard approached, tip-toeing the short steps towards the body. Afraid as if it might jump awake. It didn’t. “It’s like...it’s like it got ate by a bear…”
Anya and Jeyne approached at a much further distance. Sansa didn’t, too focused on keeping the porridge in her stomach. She didn’t want to see how awful the rest of the man’s wounds were. Or whether or not she could see brains beneath jagged muscle and crushed skull.

“Would it be a bear, though?” Jeyne asked.

“What else is big enough to do this? Moose would just ram ‘im. And wolves would’a teared him apart.”

Anya took a cautious step forward, just one step. “I suppose. But with the snows this thick and nothing else around, why leave him? Why not eat him, or take him back to your cave, or whatever bears do.”

“Sometimes it’s a cave,” Mariya chimed in. “Sometimes they can dig a hole through the snow and dirt.”

“Right. So why didn’t the bear do that?”

That gave everyone pause. Silgard nudged the man’s chest with her boot (gods, please don’t, Sansa thought). He moved as one unit, too frozen. Snow stumbled off his chest. Three long, jagged lines tore down the front of his leather, breaking off rings of mail. His skin was pale blue beneath the dried blood. “So, was it a bear, or?”

“I thought they were all hib-er-nat-ing?” Mariya said, her teeth chattering. Though it might have been fear.

No one said anything after that. The bears – everything, save for the rabbit they’d seen – should be hibernating. Or at least, traveling in packs to conserve energy and share food. But animals also were as terrified as humans and witches were at the sudden terror of the snows. So, yes, maybe a stray bear or two was left wandering around the northernmost part of the continent. And eating wayward knights.

Jeyne pulled Sansa aside. Whispered (though everyone else was so silent they must have heard): “I think we should go back, now. There’s no point in wandering around lost while that thing—" pointing at the invisible monster that ate at the poor soldier”—is running around.”

Sansa couldn’t look at her friend. Her gaze caught on that gash when Silgard moved the body. She was too focused on the mutilated corpse that lay alone, frozen, dead.

Because of me
Because of me
Because of me

“So Sansa? Did you hear me?”

She forced her gaze from the way the ice froze, back to her friend. Shook sense into her head. “Yes, sorry. I… Yes. We should report back to Winterfell before it gets too dark.” There wasn’t much sun left. It was falling behind thick clouds, surrounding it from all sides.

Anya was looking at the clouds, too. “It’s too far to make it to Winterfell. Especially with the snows that are going to fall soon. We’ll need to head to Last Hearth as soon as possible before we’re caught in it.”
Jeyne nodded. “Someone needs to go warn Old Nan and everyone else.”

“I’ll do it!” Mariya said, already hopping onto her stave.

Sansa watched the little girl fly over the lake towards the abandoned village. Sansa watched in silence as she let a terrible thought consume her: Unless they’re already dead.

“We should burn the body,” Anya said after Mariya was out of sight.

“Only just before we leave,” Silgard replied. “We wouldn’t want to attract that thing.”

“And until then, what do we do? Stand here and wait? I’d rather us burn it and leave.”

“We need proof don’t we? That’s why we’re out here. At least until the old witch sees it.”

Sansa half-listened to the conversation. She was too preoccupied with the flurry of thoughts in her head. To focused on the way the man’s body was hardly a body anymore. His face...for all Sansa knew, it could be anyone. Her father, Robb, the kind guard that wished her good afternoon.

She took an uncertain step towards it. Ice crunched beneath her boots. A cracking, heavy crunch. One that she’d heard before.

Roses. Hundreds of them.

“Shite!” Silgard swore.

Sansa felt the blood in her veins freeze first. Then the the pounding in her head stopped. Her heart might have stopped, too.

All she knew was the world had gone still.

In the quiet where her blood should have been pumping against her skull, Sansa could hear it. Feel it. That familiar one-two-three. It grew louder each time, until it was almost deafening.

She closed her eyes and willed the beat to stop. Willed the roses to disappear, the snow. All of it. In the darkness behind her eyelids, Sansa was intimately aware of the fact that her fellow witches were taking cover in the trees behind her. One of them was sobbing. Another asking What the fucking hell is that?

Winter was staring down at the eaten body of the soldier. Like he was curious about it? Or like he was admiring his work…

But more importantly – he hadn’t seen her yet. The roses, she realized, weren’t for her specifically. They sprung around where Winter stood, like a field of his own making. A field that stretched nearly to the lake surrounding Queenscrown.

He hadn’t seen her yet.

Don’t.

She could will her magic to turn herself into an illusion. Hide herself until he left.

Don’t.

She could fly. Far, far, far away, before he even had the chance to recognize who stood so close to him.
“What…” she began, licking her frost-chapped lips. All the while, her brain was yelling, screaming: a terrible cacophony of reason and logic. A terrible cacophony that urged her to run away or hide like everyone else. That urged her not to say the next words: “What are you?”

A god, Old Nan’s voice echoed in her mind. The god of winter and death, and all the terrible things we want to end. All the things we endure until summer comes.

It – he – stared up at her with eyes that weren’t eyes in a body that wasn’t a body. There was no way to tell if he recognized Sansa. He was merely the shifting of winds, of ice and snow. Only, there seemed to be more of him since she last saw him in the godswood. The shadows were darker, and Sansa could almost make out the shape of him. Like a man, but nothing at all like a man.

Only, Winter’s faceless face didn’t stop staring at her. Sometimes when it shifted, Sansa saw the faceless face of the dead man lying against the tree. Sometimes when it shifted, there was nothing but black. Sometimes, she swore she saw eyes.

Someone called out Sansa, but it might have been the wind. It might have been him.

Run, you fool. Her mind was pounding against her skull, yelling at her, forcing movement into her legs. But there was something else, too, something Sansa wasn’t sure of, that was keeping her legs still, her mouth silent.

All the while, the shifting form of Winter approached.

“Sansa!” someone – Jeyne? – called out. Sansa could hear the scuffling of boots and wood on snow: the witches were scrambling onto their staves. Running away.

Like you should be. Go, you fool. Run!

He didn’t make a sound as the ephemeral form of his feet approached, step by step. Ice roses sprung forth from where he stepped, twisting up massless legs.

Ten steps separated them. Nine. Eight.

Please. Was it her, or Jeyne, that was begging Sansa to run? She couldn’t tell. Wind whipped around and around the moving shape of Winter, straight towards Sansa. The burnt-edge of her cloak shivered around her legs.

Seven. Six. Five.

“What... who are you?” she repeated. Sansa took a half-step back, but her body wouldn’t move any further. She felt the clawing of roses up her own legs, like Winter was trying to reach her, touch her. Keep her.

Four. Three. Two.

The god cocked his head. Opened a gap where his mouth might have been if he had one – if he was something more than a dream, an idea made alive. Sansa saw the shattered jaw and dried muscles of the knight. She blinked – gone.

One.

So close, and still her mind was screaming at her. Begging her – begging to all the Old
Gods and New Gods and gods she didn’t even know – to run. Run run run.

Instead, Sansa heard her voice, so weak in the whipping wind and snow that surrounded her: “Who am I to you?”

Zero.

Winter reached up with shapeless hands, one on either side of her head, hovering inches away. Sansa could feel the cold emanating off of them: like she had stuck her head into the pool of black water that the weirwood tree stood watch above in the godswood. The cold of it erased all thoughts and reason.

The wind that whistled through the darkness of his face might have said: mine.

Winter – slowly, so slowly, like he couldn’t fathom that his Summer was here in the flesh – closed that gap. Touched her face with hands of ice and snow and death.

Sansa screamed.
[Honestly, the best thing about writing a good cliffhanger is reading everyone’s reactions ;)]

Okay, so this chapter ended up a lot longer than I thought, but also really good! (I think/hope :D Also, I’m uh starting to feel a bit of regret for all the stuff I’m putting Sansa through in this story….oops…]

There was ice, and cold, and darkness.

And screaming. Against the howling wind whipping her cloak and her hair, against the snow that swirled around her, against the scrambling of her friends to run or help. Against all of that: Sansa remembered she was screaming.

Mine.

Winter’s fingers were burning ice against her face. She felt the cold seeping beneath her skin, freezing her very bones and muscles with his touch. Sansa’s lips were raw and chapped, her throat too.

And her heart. A thunderous beating in her chest. So heavy she could feel it beating against her temples, where Winter’s ephemeral fingers dug into her skin. A frantic melody. In fear, yes. And also in something else that she wasn’t sure about.

Sansa stared at the shadowy form of Winter before her. In the ripples of shadow, she could see the snow and trees behind him. His eyes (where his eyes should be) stared straight into her. Through her.

A gaping ripple opened at the center of its head. “Mine.”

Sansa stared at him, at the thing holding onto her. It sounded like a word, not a whisper of wind. Like the god was learning – slowly, and with uncertainty – how to speak.

The icy tendrils of his fingers moved down, cupping either side of her jaw. Wisps of it burned her throat, but it was a lighter touch than before. A light touch that burned and burned. Winter lowered one hand further, down her arm, clutching around her wrist. Even through the thickness of her cloak, Sansa wanted her hand to fall off.

His mouth opened again. “You must be her,” Winter said. Said, with that mouth that wasn’t a mouth, but whose edges were more solid than the rest of him.

“I–” Sansa began, words failing her. She felt her heart hammering, so fast and so loud it was like a single thrum. Sansa tried to pull her wrist free.

“You were in the dance,” he continued, squeezing her wrist tighter. Knowing she meant to
break free, and wanting her to do anything but. The flurry of Winter’s face leaned in towards her, as if he was examining her. There weren’t eyes to see, and yet Sansa could feel the weight of his gaze over each inch of her skin. “And now, here you are. In my winter. My lovely Summer…”

The words sounded wrong. Like he hadn’t learned them – like he was mimicking the way a hundred or thousand or million people spoke, taking bits and pieces here and there. And among it all: the swirling snow, the howling wind, her pounding heart.

Slowly, the rippling shadows of his face wavered closer together, knitting into a single form. It wasn’t solid, not completely. She could still see spurts of trees and shadows beyond him. But solid enough that Sansa could make out where those eyes should have been, a nose and a mouth and a chin. Sansa couldn’t help but wonder if Winter hadn’t been looking at her to study what a human looked like.

Studying how to look like a human. How to sound like a human. How to be human.

“Please,” she said, her voice weaker than she wanted it to be. Or maybe it was just the wind, drowning her. Or maybe it was the god – the god of death, of winter – staring at her, holding on to her. Insisting that Sansa was his. “Please stop the storm.”

The form of its head tilted, and she swore there was a smile on those lips. A blank smile, only the movement without any of the mirth. “But why? This is for you.”

Her brain was sluggish. All of the things she wanted to say to him, to hurl at him. None of them were there to use. “Because I…” she began, watching as Winter tilted his head to the other side. The smile remained. “I don’t want them. I never meant to–”

“Meant?” he asked. His face moved backward, like he was astonished. Eyes stared at her, but didn’t move or blink. “We don’t mean anything, my sweet. We are. We are everything, and you are mine.”

His words grew louder and louder until Sansa felt them. An echo in tune with her frantic heart. She wondered if it was the wind or something else that she felt mirror against where he touched her wrist.

Say something, anything, she yelled at herself. “Please.” It was pathetic. Sansa pulled on her arm, “Let me go, please. I’m not her, I’m–”

Something hit Winter, tendrils of him flying away in smoke and steam. And he shouted in pain. A mix of sound and feel – like he shouted in her brain, echoes of it shaking her very bones.

Sansa saw Jeyne, floating ten feet in the air, hardly a few paces away. Smoke sizzled from her fingertips.

Run! Sansa tried to shout.

It didn’t matter whether Sansa thought it or said it: Winter hurled massive chunks of ice and snow at Jeyne. She dodged half. Her body fell with a resounding thump in the snow, her stave clattering against the trees.

“No!”

Winter held onto her, his fingers burning cold against her wrists. “Come, my sweet, my Summer,” he said. Snows whirled around them, catching the fading sunlight in a whirlwind of reds
and oranges and yellows. Like they were part of a raging fire, the heart of it. The trees flickered in and out of existence. The snows, too, and the witches who were flinging balls of fire, spurred on by Jeyne (who lay unmoving). Yelling. Steam sizzled around them – but Winter did not let go.

A flicker of black ran towards them. Faster and faster, growing. Sansa feared it to be the undead corpse of the knight. Or the bear monstrosity that ate it. Or the true form of Winter, come to take over the world with ice and snow.

It moved, grew. Transformed into the shape of Old Nan.

Landed on top of Winter. No, not on top of. Inside.

Winter and Old Nan couldn’t exist in the same plane. And the heavier object survived: Old Nan, whose form was made of flesh and blood, and not Winter’s ice and wind and shadows.

Sansa felt his shouts, his screams, like he was shouting directly inside her chest or head as he disappeared. An echo of them reverberated against her ribs as the whorls of snow died down into stillness around them. Still: she felt his screaming, his pain.

She had been flung back a few paces. Staring at the canopy of branches above her, the stain of dusk beyond that. It was quiet, so quiet. Sansa sat up in the snow, her head dizzy from the movement. And though she sat on it, felt it snaking down the collar of her cloak, Sansa didn’t feel the snow seeping up through her clothes. Didn’t feel the shiver of cold trail down her spine. She didn’t feel anything.

Like a darkness tore away what she was and replaced it with emptiness. Coldness.

She reached up and touched her face, where Winter’s hands grabbed her. Her skin felt raw, hot.

Sansa watched as Old Nan moved from Sansa to the corpse, which had been tossed to its side in the flurry. Divots of snow were burnt around it. The old woman stared at it, no emotions on her face. Though it might have been fear that made the witch clutch her stave tighter. It might have been fear that Winter had done this, whether of his own will or by the fact that the storms brought forth unimaginable horrors. It might have been all of that, and more. It must have been.

“Silgard,” Old Nan called behind her. The girl cautiously approached, holding on to her stave. She looked around, waiting for Winter to come back. Praying that he wouldn’t. “Can you burn this thing.”

It wasn’t an ask, really, but Silgard nodded and channeled her magic. They stood there watching the corpse burn as dusk set upon the world.

Sansa stretched out her fingers towards the fire, but they still felt cold.

“What…” she began as the flames licked five, ten feet up into the air. They made sure to move the body far enough from nearby trees, but she couldn’t help but worry about them. Sansa’s head felt stuffed, like a snowstorm was raging inside it. Looked up at the old witch, who was staring down at her (again. Always staring down. Annoyed. Displeased). “What did you do to him?”

“It,” Old Nan corrected, wiping snow from her face. Ice formed on the fringe of her shawl, the wayward wisps of her white hair. Sansa could tell the woman was doing her best to appear unfazed by the god. But the way her knees shook, how tightly she held onto her stave – Sansa knew better. It must have taken a toll to shred the shadowed form of a god.
“It thinks it’s a he,” the old witch continued, “and it won’t be gone for long.” She added, quiet enough so only Sansa could hear, “And it still thinks it loves you.”

“But…” Doesn’t he?

No. That was clear as day. Winter didn’t love Sansa, not for the girl she was or for the things she’d done: helping out smallfolk, smiling at passersby, always making sure to bring back sweets for her siblings. Those were things humans fell in love with another human for. Winter loved Sansa because she looked like Summer. Because Sansa took up Summer’s place in the dance. Winter didn’t truly love Sansa, no.

The idea stung.

Old Nan, meanwhile, ignored Sansa quiet confusion. She turned to the other witches, half of whom floated in the air at the crest of snow-covered trees. The other half were helping Jeyne to her feet (thank the gods, she’s fine, she’s okay). All of the witches were just as shocked and uncertain as Sansa felt, the starkness of their emotions shifting in the firelight. “Come, girls,” Old Nan said, swinging her leg over her stave. Sansa hoped that in the crackling flamelight, no one else saw how the woman staggered to get airborne. “It’s late. We’d best hurry before something else shows up.”

* * *

Sansa blinked, and the memory of Winter’s shadowy face, his icy fingers, disappeared.

Old Nan was holding a pouch of herbs for her, staring at her all the while. The lines creasing her forehead seemed to grow deeper with each passing day since the Dance. It was a wonder they hadn’t carved down all the way to her skull yet.

A week had passed since then. A week since they saw the horrors his (its) storm was unleashing upon the world. A week since he (it) touched her. They had yet to see him (it) again. No more flowers cresting up from Sansa’s footsteps in that week. But Old Nan blowing Winter up didn’t get rid of him (it) entirely. The storms didn’t stop, just lessened enough to give people hope that it was the end. Sansa knew it wasn’t. Because upon each of the millions of snowflakes was still Sansa’s face. He (it) wasn’t dead. Though she couldn’t help but wonder if it even was possible to kill a god.

Sansa grabbed for the pouch, but Old Nan pulled it back just out of her reach. “Were you listening to me, girl?”

It was an effort not to shake her head. It felt like someone replaced her brain with pudding, or snow. Something intangible and thick. Often, Sansa felt like she was swimming just to collect her thoughts. Someone (grumpkins, maybe) had replaced her rationality all those weeks ago, the night in the clearing. Sometimes Sansa swore her heart beat to the tune of the Dance: clack clack clack.

“No, I– Sorry, I’ve been tired.”

Old Nan narrowed her eyes at her, handing over the pouch. She knew, of course, the way Sansa’s mind and body didn’t feel okay. Sansa couldn’t help but wonder if anyone ever managed to free themselves from the clutches of a god. Couldn’t help but wonder if anyone else ever made one fall in love with them.

“I was saying,” Old Nan began (again), “that it would be best for us to try something else. Obviously – from what I gathered from Anya and Silgard – you cannot seem to be trusted around it. And it found you again, despite our efforts, small as it was. I’ve been talking with…”
There was more to that, but Sansa couldn’t hear it. A million terrible whispers floating through the haze of her brain started shouting. In Sansa’s own voice, in Old Nan’s, her father’s, what she thought her mother’s sounded like, Jeyne’s. The flitted in and out, each of them the same:

*It’s your fault—*

*Your fault—*

*All your fault—*

“No!” The tone startled even Sansa, her voice echoing off the stones. She swore vials shook on their shelves. The voices stopped – everything was silent. “No,” she repeated, quieter.

“No?”

Sansa looked at Old Nan. The woman looked both confused and displeased (again), and the expression, the worry around her eyes, bothered Sansa.

“No,” Sansa repeated. Her fingers clutched around the pouch of herbs, and she could feel them break apart beneath her grip. There was a fire in her, and Sansa had no way to get rid of it than to get it *out*. “No. It wasn’t my fault at all, Old Nan. *You* took me to watch the Winter Dance. *You* didn’t tell me why we were there, or what we were going to see. This storm, and the dead knights, and the things in the darkness, and Winter thinking he loves me…” The words were choked, but Sansa shoved them out: “It’s your fault, too.”

“So, please,” she continued, her voice lowering. Sansa’s breaths came out short. “Please, just...tell me what this is. All of it.”

Old Nan took in a single, long breath. Held it for what felt like forever, before letting it go. The would woman looked frustrated, like she wanted to be anywhere else, with anyone else. Sansa was certain she wasn’t going to say anything again. More lies and cryptic roundabouts, none of which *meant* anything to Sansa.

*Please just tell me.*

Seconds, maybe minutes, passed. Old Nan merely said, “It’s the story.”

That gave Sansa pause. She knew the story, of course. Could picture each of the illustrations in the shadows of a blink. Had *lived* through the Dance that began it, this.

“The...story…” Sansa said

Old Nan shuffled to make sure the door’s latch was firmly in place. The windows’, too. Even then, Old Nan moved to the corner of the room furthest from them all, motioning for Sansa to come here with a wave of her hand. Sansa did. Her fingers worked at the pouch of herbs, grinding them down to dust. Worry and anticipation and fear. She wasn’t sure which emotion won in the storm raging in her chest. And she wasn’t sure (in the seconds that it took for Old Nan to open her mouth and speak) whether or not she *truly* wanted the truth of it.

Sometimes – Sansa knew – the truth was far, far worse than the lies.

The woman spoke in hushed tones, though it wasn’t a whisper. “The story, as I’m sure you know. Winter and Summer helplessly in love, meeting only twice a year for a dance. To exchange rule over the world.”
“You’ve told me this before,” Sansa interrupted.

Old Nan nodded. She continued, her voice was even quieter. “And now, you’re part of the story. You’ve danced yourself into it, and try as I might, there aren’t enough witches who have seen this before that can help me. None of it has worked, as you can see.” Motioned to the window, where there was nothing but white. “I can’t seem to work out a way for you to get out except to go through.”

“To...go through...” Sansa repeated, working through the revelation.

To finish the dance. To live out the rest of this hellish storm, and

Unless...what? Unless Sansa found out a way to free herself, when Old Nan couldn’t? Old Nan was so much older, had seen so much more. All Sansa had done in her short witch life was grow crops and become a god’s lover.

Unless... Sansa changed the story. Two lovers, destined never to meet save for the changing of seasons. What if (Sansa hated that she was having this idea), instead of going through the story, waiting for it to end – what if she rewrote it?

It was the most foolish idea she had. She shook it away.

Sansa nibbled her lower lip, leaving indents with her teeth. “Has this happened before? A god falling in love with a human?”

Old Nan looked away for a moment, and Sansa wondered if the old woman was looking behind her. Not physically behind, but behind in years. To a time before even Sansa was born. When things were vastly different, and witches weren’t slaughtered in droves for being different.

Back to Sansa. “Bringing you to the Dance was a foolish decision on my part, I will concede.” Old Nan appeared displeased at herself, having to admit something was her fault. But it was. It was. “I was curious.”

Curious enough to endanger me – the whole of the North – for your stupid little experiment?

Only, Sansa said none of that. A quiet, “Oh,” escaped her lips. And then: “What happened to them? To the other people who fell into the stories?”

Sansa thought she already knew the answer. What else could have happened to someone who caught the eye of a god save for death? (of which, Sansa hoped hers was painless). Except, Old Nan said with a dejected sigh, “I don’t know.”

Which Sansa thought was worse.

And worse, was the revelation that as much as Sansa didn’t know things, Old Nan didn’t know either. She wondered how different the world would have been had the Dragons not mercilessly slaughtered witches. How much knowledge blinked out of existence in those short years when witches were tracked down for their magic? How far back did the world travel – a decade, a century?

Sansa shivered. At the fate of witches, at the fate of her own life. Uncertainty and shadows. All that Sansa knew for sure was her future lay drowned in snow and ice.

It was an effort not to touch her cheeks as the silence dragged on. The faint pink-ish outline of Winter’s hands were there, things that Sansa did her best to cover with her curls, or with a lie of
being particularly cold (which wasn’t a lie; the air felt chillier, blankets not as warm, since their hunt). Sometimes, she could feel the ghost of his grip around her wrist in quiet moments like this. Like Winter wasn’t truly gone (he wasn’t). Like Winter wasn’t truly satisfied until he could drag Sansa back with him to his palace of ice and darkness.

“Give me your pin, Sansa.”

Her fingers flew up to her neck, the trout cold against her fingers. Sansa could feel each of the scales. “Why?”

Old Nan pursed her lips. Sighed out of her nose, as if debating whether to tell Sansa anything else. Like one forced revelation was enough for a decade. Sansa hoped the look on her own face (one she tried for stubborn and afraid) would work. It did. “I think… How do you think it manages to find you: outside, in the godswood, up in the bloody fringes of the North? A lure. Your pin has been a lure for it, girl. And I plan on using it on it. Hopefully guide away Winter and its horrid storm, long enough at least.”

It was difficult to hide the shock in her face. Sansa hadn’t told Old Nan that evening: Winter staring at her in the godswood, roses springing up around her, the pin clutched between wispy fingers. But the pin – Sansa lost it the night of the Winter Dance. And Winter found it, and kept it, and used it to find her. Again, and again. It would explain, at least, how the roses always knew where Sansa was.

“What will you do with it?”

The old witch shrugged her shoulders. “Toss it in the bloody Sea. Fly it all the way to the Shadowlands, for all I care.”

Her lips were dry. “Will it work?”

“It might. Much better than waiting around for it to smother us with snow.”

That was true.

Slowly, Sansa undid the latch on the trout. Stared at it, caressed it as if hoping to ingrain the feel of it. It stared at her with unmoving silver eyes. Seconds passed before Sansa reluctantly handed it over. “And what will I be doing in the meanwhile?”

Old Nan tucked the pin safely in her cloak. “You’ll be heading South for the winter. I’ve already sent a raven to Olenna – I’m sure she’ll be delighted to have you around.”

What.


“Will be fine without one witch.” Old Nan’s voice was stern.

To spend winter away from the North, away from her home. Sansa couldn’t imagine it. A winter without snow, a winter without the warmed halls of Winterfell. Without the peace of everything – animals and plants – sleeping for the season. Without her family.

Sansa felt emptier.

“Can I at least bring Jeyne along with me?” Sansa asked as they began making their way down the tower, closing the door behind them.
“Unfortunately, no. The North will be fine without one witch, yes, but two might be asking for trouble. We’ll already be missing your talents so late in the season.”

The realization struck Sansa then: “So... you won’t be coming with me either?”

Old Nan shook her head. (Sansa was getting rather tired of that. Shaking and shrugging. And keeping secrets. And just...all of it. Sansa was just tired.) “I’ve been entrusted with looking in to

She stopped Sansa several steps from the bottom of the tower. Placed her hands on each shoulder (Sansa saw, for half a heartbeat, Winter standing in front of her, dusk and snow around them, his frozen fingers reaching up for her face. A blink, and he was gone. A memory). “Listen. You danced into a story, girl, one that tells itself to the world every year. It’s the story about ice and fire, summer and winter. You’ve made it wrong. You’ve got to stay to the end and make sure it turns out right. This pin is just buying you – us – time, is all.”

Sansa raised her hand, forgetting that her mother’s pin wasn’t fastening her cloak anymore. She would need to find a replacement before she left. “How much time,” she asked. Because time wasn’t on their side, she felt. Time to do what, if Sansa couldn’t find a way out of this? Time to save themselves, to escape.

Time to curse the girl who set the North to its death.

“I don’t know. This didn’t happen last time. But it would give us time to think, to plan at least.” She pulled out a scroll, handing it to Sansa. It was a copy of what Sansa assumed to be the same letter on its way to Olenna. Old Nan added, “It’s best you try and make things right for the things you’ve done–”

“I know what I’ve done,” Sansa hissed, her voice echoing off the walls. It sounded meaner than she intended, but she was tired. Of the endless cold, of feeling like a failure. All of it was crushing Sansa to the point where each morning, she wasn’t sure if she could physically get up and out of bed.

“What did you do?”

The voice rumbled against the stones. Sansa turned to see her father at the bottom of the stairs. Snow crusted his furs, his long brown hair.

There was a lump of ice in her stomach, and it grew tenfold.

They told Eddard Stark of a bear that tore apart his knight. One that had been unexpecting the sudden storms, and whose habits were changed because of it. They told him that his knights needed to be doubly, triply, careful as they continued their patrols. That this winter could wake up slumbering beasts that hadn’t set foot on the world in millennia: dragons made of ice, slithering demons lying just beneath the surface off the shores of Skagos. Giants and inhuman things sleeping in the furthest reaches of the North. The thousands upon thousands of bodies that lay as foundation for the Wall.

They had yet to tell the Lord of Winterfell of the god of Winter who was terrorizing the North – terrorizing his very daughter – with propositions of love.

Perhaps Old Nan was waiting for Sansa to tell him. She was his daughter, after all. And (though she was loathe to admit it), the storms were Sansa’s fault, if only because it was her feet that couldn’t resist the pull of the dance. If only because it was Sansa who looked so much (too much) like Summer.
Only, no matter how often Sansa ran into her father, whether at meals or in his study or in
tower stairwells, Sansa couldn’t bring the truth forward.

“Sansa?” Her father cocked his head at her. Waiting.

“It’s nothing, father.” Lies, and more lies. “We were just discussing plans, Old Nan and I.
Nothing to worry about.”

He let out a disinterested hm . Brushed off stray snowflakes from his furs for want of
something to do with his hands as he said, “Are you feeling better, Sansa?”

She had been injured. A truth they couldn’t hide, not when Maege and Silgard had to carry
her between them on the flight back to Winterfell. Jeyne was steady enough to fly on her own, but
Anya kept close watch on her.

“Yes, much better. Thank you.”

“Good.” A smile – small, as it was. He continued, “Has there been any new news concerning
the winter?”

The winter: the monsters of ice and snow that had zero reservations about eating men alive.
The winter: the storm, endless, growing thicker and thicker as the days passed. The winter: the god
itself, who took a fancy to Lord Stark’s daughter.

“No yet,” Old Nan stepped in. She didn’t look at Sansa, afraid perhaps that Sansa might give
something away. “Though I’ll be sending Sansa down to Highgarden for a bit, to collect some herbs
and the like. We’ll be needing as much of the South as we can to weather the storms.”

“Ah, that would be wise.” Eddard nodded, imagining the plan without needing to be told it.
At least, the plan that Old Nan was willing to weave for him. He looked between them both. And
that small smile grew, just a fraction, as he stared at Sansa. It was plain as day: relief . Relief, that she
was going South for a bit?

Something unkind poked itself against Sansa’s heart. She wished she knew why.

Eddard moved to the side of the stairwell, offering his hand in a motion of after you . “Be
safe, Sansa. I’ll see you when you return. And with any luck, after the storm has passed.”

She descended those last few stairs, her fingers trailing against the stone. When she stood
face-to-face with her father, an unkillable uge overtook her. Sansa hugged him, tighter than she had
since her mother passed.

Her father hugged back, saying, “You won’t be gone long, I imagine?”

Old Nan spoke for her. “No. Hardly enough time that you won’t realize she’s gone.”

“Good. Good.” Sansa felt his hand run through her chestnut hair, and she fought against the
urge to squeeze tighter.

Tell me , she said, but not out loud. Please, father.

The question caught in her throat: what happened to my mother?

She fell to sickness in all the cold , Eddard once said to them at the end of a winter season
many years ago. Sansa was too young to remember more than flashes of memory: her mother as
busy as she was now, always off to tend to the smallfolk; her father, worrying his hands during dinner, expectantly waiting for Catelyn to return home; the slow, heaving sobs that tore through Eddard Stark when he told his children that their mother went out into the storms, and never returned. And months later, the onslaught of pumpkins as she wanted to help but didn’t know how. Didn’t know what to do with the grief that overtook her the night her father warned against Sansa becoming a witch.

Sansa let go. “Goodbye, father.”

He smiled as she and Old Nan entered the courtyard.

What kept Sansa from asking the question (she knew) was fear. Because she wasn’t sure if she wanted to learn if she was going to die like her mother had.

* * *

Even in the dead of winter, the flowers bloomed.

It was so unlike the North. Trees were green, though a handful had a smattering of yellows and burnt oranges peppering their foliage. The grass was (for the most part) green, too, shining in the morning frost. The sun turned the sky a light shade of blue, and there were only a handful of clouds above. A light chill crested through the fields, flowers moving in tune with the wind.

Sansa landed an hour or two after dawn. She couldn’t sleep – hadn’t slept properly since she last saw winter. She knew she should have found a serving hand to direct her to a guest bedroom, but the idea of lying there whilst her brain muddled through the haze of what ifs tasted sour. So she turned right at the bridge, and followed the flowers.

Her feet moved through the gravel walkways, admiring the flowers that brushed against her legs. They were a rainbow of colors: reds and pinks, yellows and oranges, whites. Each partition of the garden (this one, at least, just north of the inner walls of Highgarden’s castle, the outer wall so far away it felt like she was out in the endless expanse of nature and not in the center of a castle) was split into flower types. Sansa let her fingers drag against them as she walked past. They were soft, and alive.

Eventually, with the sun deep into morning, Her feet wound up a small set of stairs to a landing between two partitions. She stopped at the top.

A small landing, arranged in concentric semicircles, with tiled pathways and benches. It all looked to be carved out of a single stone, the flowerbeds part of it too. Sansa could picture it. In the midst of summer: hundreds, maybe even thousands, of flowers. Swaying in the gentle breeze. So many colors, more than she could ever dream of.

Roses.

She forgot how to breathe.

“She?”

She turned. The girl bounced into her with a hug, nearly taking Sansa over the edge of a wall.

“Good gods, Marg…” Sansa felt the stone digging into her back, and the softness of her friend pushing against her front. She smelled good – like summer and citrus. And roses.

Margaery pulled away, laughed. It was so light, so soft – so unlike how Sansa was feeling
right now. Still, she forced a smile on her lips. “I hadn’t expected to see you so soon! It’s still winter, is it not?”

Sansa nodded.

“And your hair…” Margaery lovingly ran her long fingers through Sansa’s curls, which were still dyed chestnut. Sansa had gotten used to the color. And though she knew she didn’t need to dye them anymore – not with the revelation it wasn’t her hair necessarily that drew Winter in, but her pin – Sansa didn’t want to take the chance. Even now, so many miles from the North.

“I was...trying something new,” she said, the lie so common to her ears it didn’t sound at all like a lie anymore. Sansa added a smile, too. “I thought perhaps I would look as pretty as you do.”

The flattery worked better on Margaery than it had on Jeyne. She laughed.

Behind Margaery, the Queen of Thorns stood at the top of the stairs, staring at Sansa. It didn’t take more than a single look to tell Sansa that the old witch knew. Everything.

Sansa fought against the whispers in her head. Forced another smile to her lips. “I see grandmother followed you here, Marg.”

Margaery turned around, one hand wrapped around Sansa’s. “Oh, grandmother, you really shouldn’t sneak up on us like that!”

Olenna smiled at Margaery, but her attention quickly moved back to Sansa. “You didn’t come here to admire the roses, I hope?” the old woman asked. She walked towards them, her stave clack against the tiles. It was wrought in the shape of vines, coalescing into a knot at the top. Small rosebuds sprouted from the ends of the vines, nearly all of them closed. It was a beautiful thing, though the stave looked much better in the throes of summer – covered in the splendor of roses and flowers, each bud opening into an exact wooden copy of the flowers that lay around Highgarden.

The old witch approached them with slow, sure steps, pointing with her stave the mounds around them. “There’s nothing to see or smell of them, anyways, not for several months. Unless you like the way shit smells.”

“Grandmother!”

Olenna scrunched her nose but didn’t apologize. Took a few steps forward to stare at the piles of mulch lining the curved path. She wasn’t technically the grandmother to Margaery, but the old woman much preferred to be called grandmother than some other nasty nickname. Queen of Thorns wasn’t bad, she said, though smallfolk used it as a way to separate her (a witch) from them (non-witches). Which was fine.

Much better than Old Rose or Old Fart, Olenna said. And often, usually whenever Old Nan was about. Old Nan never cared much about her own nickname, saying there weren’t witches around who remembered her own name anyways.

Olenna adjusted the draping of her dress. The edge was dirtied. Sansa took in a deep breath (ignoring the way the mulch smelled. Though it was much better than the way the North tasted: like nothing. Like emptiness. Death). “Old Nan sent a raven earlier this week. I hope you received it?”

There it was again: that same knowing look Olenna gave Sansa. But there was more to it, too. Like she knew more, either because of her age, or because Old Nan divulged more than the simple request in the scroll. It wasn’t fear or disappointment that deepened Olenna’s wrinkles. It was...pity?
The old witch began walking along the stone walkway, silently offering (or demanding) Margaery and Sansa to follow along. They did. Sansa eyed each nameplate for the roses as they went: moonstone, always and forever, sunshine daydream, falling in love. Sansa wondered if this was a private garden (perhaps Olenna’s?), since none of the names were the sorts that Sansa studied in her books. She imagined the garden to be breathtaking when the roses were in bloom.

As she walked, Sansa couldn’t help but imagine small roses pushing up through the mulch. Glistening in the afternoon sun, a familiar sight. Roses made entirely of ice. They disappeared with a blink.

After a while, Olenna spoke. “I can take you to the Vale, but we shouldn’t dally. Can you be ready at dawn tomorrow?”

_I can go on my own_, Sansa thought, and not for the first time. She remembered the look of disappointment (though there was _something else_, too) shadowing Old Nan’s face. It was gone hardly a second later. “Yes, I’ll be ready. Thank you.”

Olenna shrugged. “In exchange,” she continued, waving her hand dismissively, “we can put you to work while you’re visiting. I’m sure Marg would like the help – there’s plenty more farmwork to be done here in Highgarden than the North, as you can imagine. Though it would help, too, if the girls didn’t spend so much time gossiping instead and working…”

Margaery giggled, not at all attempting to counter the witch. When Sansa looked at her, she smiled back. Grabbed onto her arm (Margaery was such a bubbly thing, always happy and smiling). Still, Sansa couldn’t help but lean into the touch. It felt...nice.

The girl whispered (hardly a whisper, in truth), “Oh, I’ve so much to catch you up on, Sansa! And you me.” Lowered her voice, actually whispering this time. Her breath tickled Sansa’s cheek. “And I do hope you can tell me the truth for your visit?”

Sansa smiled and nodded with an, “Of course,” though she wasn’t certain which question she was answering.

Olenna watched them, scratching her chin beneath the shawl that covered all of her head save for her face. There were faded roses embroidered on the cloth – it was impossible to escape roses in Highgarden, Sansa remembered. She hoped she wouldn’t drown before she managed to figure out the story of Summer and Winter.

The old witch replied, “As long as you work while you gossip, I don’t much mind what you girls do. It’s winter – there’s a lot of things to be done.”

“Of _course_, grandmother…” Margaery drawled out, her voice light and sweet. To Sansa, she said, “Come, I’ll show you an even better garden.”

Margaery pulled her along, saying a quick farewell to the Queen of Thorns, before running through the lanes. It took ten minutes before they were climbing up another set of stairs to a similarly sized garden. Sansa swore she had seen every place in Highgarden already, from all the times she visited in the summers. But Margaery was right.

This garden was in full bloom. There was hardly any room on the pathway to walk without brushing up against flowers leaning over the stones. Every single color in the known world existed in this small corner of the castle, Sansa thought. A hundred shades of reds, oranges, yellows, blues, purples, whites – and mixes of them, too. Sansa marveled at the way the petals were splattered in two or three colors, like a painter had dropped their paints and rather liked how they flowers looked. And
the smell: gods, it was clean, crisp, and sweet.

“As much as I love you, Sansa, you never visit the South during winter.”

Sansa turned from admiring the natural whorls of colors to her friend, who was leaning against a bench and brushing the flowers that reached over the stones.

The truth...or another lie? Margaery was her friend, after all.

But so is Jeyne, and look how much truth you told her...

“You’re right,” Sansa began, walking over towards Margaery. “I should be back home right now. There’s an awful storm, so much so that in some places you could take a step in the snow and fall until the snows reach two, three, four feet above your head.”

Margaery gasped. “Good gods, that's awful!”

Sansa nodded. “Yes. So, I hope I won’t be here long, no matter how much I love the gardens and the food.”

The witch nodded, moving to sit properly on the bench, though she couldn’t seem to let her fingers move away from the flowers. She loved them, Margaery. Was the best at cultivating and growing them. It was obvious whose garden this was. “In that case, Sans, why did you come South? It sounds an awful lot like the North needs as much help as possible.”

You’re right. Sansa licked her lips, averting her gaze when Margaery turned to look at her. “I...I’m to visit my aunt.”

“Your aunt?” Margaery’s brows furrowed. She let her fingers trail along the flower stems, letting go, as if the flowers were pulled into her and forcibly pulled back. “Couldn’t you visit her on your own?”

Sansa had the same idea when Old Nan proposed it just after they left Eddard Stark in the staircase. “I thought so too, but my aunt is...unwell. It would be best if I had someone else there with me. And Old Nan is incredibly busy with the storm, she couldn’t bare to leave the North.”

Her friend motioned Sansa to sit down beside her. Plucked flower between her fingers. It was a deep yellow, golden spots like freckles. Each of its three petals was as long as a finger. Margaery smelled it. “Unwell?”

Sansa nodded, taking the offered flower and smelling it. It was earthy, clean. Like a solitary speck of spring in the middle of winter – and without the onslaught of snow, of ice, Sansa felt like it was spring. “Yes. She’s been unwell for some time. Ever since my mother passed, my aunt has never been the same.” Of that, she wasn’t sure. But there must be a reason (one on which Sansa tried not to dwell on) if both Old Nan and Olenna advised against visiting Lysa by herself.

Margaery already knew of Sansa’s mother’s passing. Foregoing platitudes of condolences with, “I hope the unwellness doesn’t run in the family…”

Sansa pushed against Margaery with her shoulder. “In that case, I’m sure your grandmother’s lovely traits will be yours soon. And her lovely stink…”

Margaery giggled. “Oh, I should hope not!”

They made idle chit-chat after that, talking about all the mundane things they’d done, and all
the exciting gossip of the other witches. As Sansa expected, there was a lot more in the South.

“Come,” Margaery said, standing. She tossed the plucked flower among the rest. “We’d best get to working before grandmother spies us trading secrets.”

Sansa looked up to the sky. It was barely midday. She forgot how long the days were in the South – even in the winter, they seemed to drag on and on. And the endless expanse of blue, the greens, the explosion of colors around her now. Sansa couldn’t help but feel like this was a dream.

She took Margaery’s hand, asking, “Was it you or Megga that got in trouble gossiping last time, and Olenna made her clean the toilets for a week?”

Margaery pouted, her fingers idly twirling the ends of her curls. “No, it was me.”

“Then I hope she punishes you again and not me this time.”

“You’re awful.”

It was a joke, but Sansa couldn’t help but feel that weight of ice grow inside her. She wondered if she slipped into one of the gardens’ pools, would she sink to the bottom? Would anyone bother to pluck her out, after what she did?

“How are you alright?” Margaery asked. Her voice cut through the darkness.

Sansa smiled at her friend, and she never felt like such a liar before. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

* * *

Sansa lay on her bed, but sleep didn’t find her. Even with (what felt like) every blanket in Highgarden piled atop her, she shivered beneath the furs. It wasn’t even cold: nothing at all like the storm that ravaged the North. Still, Sansa balled her legs against her stomach and tossed the blanket above her head.

Go to sleep, she told herself. Hoping that thinking it would make it happen.

It didn’t. A pity, because her thoughts were incredibly loud this night.

She remembered the night of the Dance, and as she twirled and moved to the beat, Sansa saw Winter standing beside her. Only, he wasn’t the vague shadows that he had been – he was solid, more complete than he had been when he touched her. Dancing with Sansa, not at all like the Winter Dance. But a dance, a waltz perhaps, though there was no orchestra of strings and flute to dance to. There was a heartbeat, loud and echoing, mimicking the music. It was hers, she thought, as Winter twirled Sansa around and around. Or: it was his, if gods even had hearts. Winter spun Sansa, leaning forward with a face that rippled with each movement. And Sansa knew before his mouth inched closer what he meant to do.

She shuddered.

Another night filled her thoughts. The godswood, blood red leaves littering fresh snow. And around her, a thousand million roses of every possible size. Only, they were splattered in colors: reds and oranges, pinks and yellows, blues and violets. Ice and color, twining up her legs. Sansa watched as they moved around her skirts, up her cloak. One was brave enough to climb all the way up to her eye-level: a single rose, not at all made of ice. Its stem was dark green, its thorns clipped. And the rose: red, darker red than even the leaves of the weirwood. It sat there, just before her, petals opening as she stared.
Sansa turned, and there he was. The roses were gone, the godswood too. It was just her, and Winter. A field of fresh snow, a fiery dusk setting in the sky above. But, no: they weren’t alone. She saw them, pushing up against all the white: hands at first, some with claws as long as her head. She turned, and there was the knight, half-eaten, his frozen entrails spilled from his stomach. Walking, slowly, towards her with eyes as black as pitch. Sansa turned. Winter was staring at her. Smiling at her. Only, there was no kindness there, or love. There wasn’t anything but death.

Sansa shivered again.

The thoughts began to move, sway, gently from one side to the next.

She opened to the expanse of water.

There was an island in the distance, perhaps Skagos or even the Mormont’s. It was hard to tell against the darkness of night. Trees jutted from the rocks, so dark in the distance they looked to be a solitary mass of needles reaching up for the sky. Snow was falling around her.

Sansa swayed. The boat she was on was huge – enough for two masts, and a flurry of sails and ropes. It creaked beneath her, waves gently kissing its sides.

*Where am I?* she wondered. Stepping once, twice. The snow on the deck was fresh, and her feet left solid imprints in the white.

*A dream*.

Of course, it was a dream – she wasn’t in the North, let alone on a ship. She was in the South, in Highgarden, in a bed filled with feathers and the lingering scent of flowers wafting in through the windows. It always smelled like flowers in Highgarden. Even now, in the throes of winter. Like the ice and snow never once touched the gardens, the castle walls.

Sansa ran into someone. “Watch it, young lady!” they said, more annoyed than angry.

“Sorry,” she called out. The last syllable hung on the icy air. She shivered.

*A very realistic dream, then*, she reasoned.

She turned. To the west (or maybe it was the east, she didn’t know her stars as well as she should), Sansa could make out the stark line of the Wall. Hundreds of feet tall, her father told her. It looked just like the real thing, too. Sansa had only seen it from afar – when they went hunting for that thing, yes, but before that too. Up in the skies, the wind whipping her cloak, her only companions her stave and her thoughts: Sansa sometimes sat and stared north at the Wall. Wondered how powerful the witches who built it were. Thousands of years ago, they built it. And for thousands of years, it stood.

Sansa wondered, too, what lived on the other side of the Wall. Fantastical stories of giants and almost-people and trees who walked like men. All sorts of creatures and things. She loved those stories, though not as much as Bran did. Sansa learned them from Old Nan so she could tell them to her brother as he drifted off to sleep.

They were stories. But now...now, she wasn’t so sure.

Sansa bent to collect snow in her hands, forming a ball. It was cold. It left a resounding *whack* against the mast when she threw it, sliding down slowly as real snow did. If Sansa didn’t know better, she would have thought this wasn’t a dream.
“You should be down with the rest o’ them.”

Sansa looked up. A sailor stood beside her, staring at her with a confused look. She wondered if the look was mirrored on her own face. “Sorry, I just…” She didn’t need to explain herself in a dream. Dreams didn’t make sense, after all. “Where is this ship bound to?” she asked, walking away towards the railing. The sea was black beneath the ship. She watched the white foam drift along the ship’s side.

The sailor followed her. “To White Harbor. We got caught in a storm o’ the way, ended up a lot mo’ north than expected. M’lady,” he added, though Sansa heard the uncertainty there. Is this a lady?, he wondered. Or: Is this a weird figment of my own imagination, as I am a figment in hers?

“I see.”

Behind the ship was a dusty smattering of fog, lying just atop the water. It stretched all the way from the Wall to the ends of the horizon to the east (or west). It almost blended in with the clouds above, as if the sky itself had fallen onto the water.

The fog grew. Taller, moving faster than the ship.

Sansa felt ice in her stomach, that same heavy block. She wondered if it was heavy enough to drown her should she fall off the ship.

But if this was a dream, and a dream followed the rules: then something bad was bound to happen. And that fog wasn’t a fog.

She ran past the sailor, whose boots pounded behind her as he followed. Yelling at her to “Be careful, m’lady!” when her foot nearly gave way on the snow. Up the stairs she ran, to the front of the ship, to the man steering.

“Please!” Sansa shouted at him, pulling on his arm. He looked surprised first, then annoyed. “Please, don’t sail through that!”

“Seven hells!” He looked up at the other sailor, sharing a moment of Who is this crazed lady?, before looking back at Sansa. Turning behind to see the thickening fog approached. Back to Sansa, with an incredulous look etching his face. “It’s jus’ a fog, m’lady. We’ve been in worse.” To the sailor, he said, “Yorace, take this little’un back down below deck. Wouldn’t want her t’ fall overboard.”

“Aye,” Yorace said, reaching for Sansa.

She spun, tripping on the snow littering the deck and falling. Yorace swore, carefully helping her to her feet, but the grip on her shoulder meant You aren’t running around the deck anymore.

Not until she shouted, “Look!”

Because it was bad.

Through the fog: an iceberg. Glittering against the faint moonlight peeking through the clouds, white and silver and blue. It moved, faster than an iceberg had any right to.

No, not bad – horrible. Both sailors swore.

Sansa did, too. Because it was an iceberg shaped just like her. At least three or four hundred feet tall. Solid ice. And aiming straight for them.
The man helming the ship looked between it and her. Blinking, not at all believing. “Shite!” he began a string of swears, as did Yorace. “Shite, shite! Go, adjust the sails!” he yelled at the sailor.

Yorace didn’t have to be told, he was already running down to the mast, hauling on ropes. Yelling for other sailors to come above deck and help. Some did, slowly and uncertain at first. But one sight of the iceberg and they were quick.

It was worse.

She could hear screaming. Not hers, not the sailors. But people – below deck, their wailing carrying through the metal grates and out the windows. They weren’t saying anything – no “Help” no “Save us” – just screaming, crying. Incoherent pleas of I don’t want to die, not now, please.

Sansa lurched as the ship turned sharp right, aiming for the coast. She ran to the back of the ship, slamming her hands into the wood. Willing her magic to spur the ship further away from the iceberg. It was a quarter mile away now. Sansa looked at herself: it looked just like her. Too much like her, for a god to recreate in a declaration of ice.

Sansa tried to swallow the lump in her throat. It wouldn’t budge.

The ship did, though, under the aid of her magic. Come on come on come on, please, she begged, throwing everything she could into the water. Sansa felt cold slither inside her veins at the loss of magic, but she didn’t care. She didn’t care about herself: but these people, hundreds of them – Sansa couldn’t let them die.

Not again.

Please.

“Please!” she yelled.

The iceberg approached, a thousand feet away now. They were going to make it, she thought, watching the waves shudder around them.

Krshhhhhhh

Sansa flew to the side. Someone was yelling: “A bloody rock! We hit some’ing!” She heard the captain swear above the deafening roar of waves and ice and people.

Sansa looked up at the iceberg. Only a hundred feet separated them. The edge of it was going to collide with the ship. And all the people on it...

Snowflakes and roses were one thing. But this–

“Stop!” Sansa yelled into the wintry air. It was drowned by the creaking of wood, the frantic screaming below. She ran to the edge, clinging onto the railing so tight she feared something would break. “Please, stop! Just stop it!”

The ship lurched as the sailors tugged on ropes, doing everything to maneuver the ship out of the rock, and away from the iceberg.

There were tears stinging her face, freezing in the cold. Sansa yelled, so loudly her throat hurt. “Why are you doing this? Just stop it, please!” She couldn’t see the iceberg, tears distorting her vision. “Please! What do you want?”
Winter’s voice was a thunderous roar: You.

The iceberg smashed into the ship.

Sansa flew overboard. The coldness hit her before the impact, swallowing her completely as she fell and fell and fell.

She awoke violently. Sweat clinging her clothes to her skin, a shiver overtaking her entire body as a massive pit of ice sat in her stomach – and Sansa was crying. She felt like throwing up, the sting of bile high in her throat. Her hands were clammy as she wiped them over her face, over the sweat and tears and snot. She felt like she was burning. She felt like she was freezing.

It was just a dream, a dream, a dream.

It was just a lie.

She couldn’t stop the tears flowing down her face, or the shaking that racked through her body. The sobs. The pounding in her chest. And Sansa knew why: It wasn’t a dream.

And no one survived.
Sansa stared up at the Gates of the Moon. It was as imposing as the Bloody Gate (though they flew over that with only a minor delay. The Vale wasn’t as used to the sight of witches as the rest of Westeros. It was a kindness they hadn’t shot them down with arrows, at least). Thick stone towers sat on either side of the massive iron gate, all grey, blending in with the sheer rocks on either side. In the distance, the Eyrie shone against the midday sun.

It was a long way from Highgarden. Sansa was thankful to stretch her legs at the Gates. She wasn’t thankful for the bitter chill that slowly consumed her the further north they flew – and they weren’t up at the Eyrie yet. Sansa couldn’t help but wonder if the castle shone because it was encased in ice (like Winterfell must be now).

Anyone with half a wit would have come here to brave out the fury of ice and snow. Of winter.

She turned to the sound of Olenna’s voice (it wasn’t creaky like Old Nan’s ones, still holding on to a certain sweetness. At least, when she wasn’t angry, or peeved). “What do you mean she didn’t come down for winter?”

The guard at the gate stared at her. His helm was carved in the shape of a falcon, the beak curving down over his nose. Metal tail feathers transformed into sky blue fabric at the nape of his neck, swaying in the breeze. It wasn’t snowing this far south in the valley of the Vale, but they weren’t entirely free from the clutches of winter. The wind itself was colder than the doubtless feet of snows that must be covering Winterfell right now, amplified by the tall cliffs that surrounded the Gates of the Moon, and the ocean winds that weaved through the rocky channels. Even with the additional layers, Sansa shivered.

The guard shook his head at the witches, his blue tail feathers caressing first one cheek, then the other. “Sorry, m’ladies, but I mean what I said. She don’t come down much for winter?”

“Garrold’s right,” the other guard added, stepping towards them. The tip of his halberd shone in the faint light that trickled down between the cliffsides. He was older, grey streaking his beard. Sansa wondered the last time an army ever dared to storm up to the Eyrie. Probably before she was born. “I can’t remember the last time I saw ‘er, and I been posted ‘ere a long time.”

The first man nodded, mumbling something about how crazy she was, and how likely she was already dead. Either he didn’t mean for Sansa and Olenna to hear, or he didn’t rightly care if
they did.

“Who are our guests, hm?”

Both the guards jumped, strips of blue dancing behind their heads. A man came through a door at the side of the closed gate. He was a large man, bald, but with a smile that didn’t frighten Sansa. It didn’t calm her down much, either. The purple of his house crest stood out against the grey.

He stared at Olenna first, the more imposing of the two witches, eyes drifting up along the length of her stave. The rosebuds were closed, even the ones at the top. Eventually, the man’s gaze moved over Sansa, and she couldn’t help but wonder how much of an effort it was for him to hide (albeit, not well) the surprise in his face. It disappeared shortly after.

Olenna gave the man a small bow of her head, and Sansa followed suit. He wasn’t a Lord in the same sense that Eddard Stark was. But at the moment, with her aunt incapacitated (and likely dead, lying frozen and alone in the Eyrie), this man must at least attend to the matters of the Vale. And the way he spoke confirmed that.

“Ah, welcome, witches.” His voice was loud, but not booming. Enough to earn attention without. There’s a small smile on his face as he continued, “I’m Nestor Royce, lord here of the Gates of the Moon. Only, I don’t believe we sent a raven for help…?”

Olenna took a step forward. “No, we aren’t here to stay, but thank you for your generosity.” The speed with which the old witch was able to turn her tongue was remarkable. Sansa could already picture how the same conversation would go were it Old Nan standing beside her instead: short, clipped, and to the point (a sneer barely concealed). She didn’t realize how grateful she was for the delay until now. “I was just speaking with your guards here. They say the Lady Lysa hasn’t been down from the Eyrie in a long while?”

The man nodded. “Aye. She’s not dead,” pointedly looking at his guards, who conveniently found the cliff faces intriguing, “at least not since the summer. The household comes down at the end of the summer, as you can well imagine how freezing the Eyrie can get. If you’d like, you can speak with them here…?”

Olenna shook her head. “No, but thank you. Glad to hear that the lady Lysa is still alive” (Sansa heard an I hope at the end of that). “If you would be so kind though, my companion and I would like a bit of refreshment before we fly up.”

“Of course.”

The Gates weren’t filled with luxuries of any sort, but the chilled water tasted heavenly sliding down Sansa’s parched throat. They warmed themselves by a roaring fire, watching various members of Royce’s and Lysa’s household go this way and that, all the while listening to Royce talk about her aunt. There wasn’t much new information: she was unwell, still.

They said their thanks as they (unfortunately) braved the chill outside again. Royce looked past the Gate, towards the climbing mountains where – even from way down here – they could make out the faint shape that was the Eyrie. Fog surrounded it, casting it in a dull grey silhouette against the midday skies. To the northwest, Sansa saw the heavy gathering of clouds above where Winterfell likely stood, many many miles away. How long until those clouds, heavy with snow and the unrequited love (or fury) of a god descended below the North? Roamed over the Neck, spreading here to the Vale and even as low as Dorne? How long did Sansa have to appease Winter?

“...too long since she’s stumbled down from her castle,” Royce had been saying. Sansa
blinked back into the conversation. She’d missed the beginning of it.

Royce added, licking his lips, “Please. Tell me if you find him”

“Of course,” the witch promised, though to what Sansa wasn’t sure. “Thank you again for your hospitality. Should you ever need anything, don’t be afraid to send a raven.” Royce nodded. Olenna looked between the man and the Eyrie. Then over to Sansa. “Looks like we’d best hurry.”

Sansa nodded, and they flew up, higher and higher, towards the castle. The wind was harsher the higher they rose, to the point where Sansa had to clutch her cloak closed for fear that a gust would balloon it and send her spiraling off her stave. She chanced a single look down – and prayed to all the gods that she wouldn’t fall.

With the midday sun against it, the Eyrie glistened. It’s pale white stones shimmered in the sunlight, a sheen of frost covering all the way to the pale blue tiles on their tops. It looked like it was carved from the rocky stone of the Giant’s Lance beneath. Like a slab of marble, unfinished and sharp at the bottom, transforming into something admittedly breathtaking. The last time Sansa visited, she had been hardly half her age, and not a witch. It was so much different flying to the Eyrie, to a castle made impregnable by its height above the floor (don’t look down). Sansa couldn’t stop staring in wonder, because it was. A wonder that anyone could fathom building something like this at the top of a mountain.

As they neared, they circled the castle, weaving through the seven towers. It took no time at all, how small the Eyrie was compared to the sprawling Highgarden or Winterfell. But more than that: neither of them felt like landing down without at least getting an eyeful of what the castle was. It looked empty. No torches flickered in the frosted windows. No echoes of voices or movement.

If my aunt is dead...

Sansa wrapped her cloak tighter around her as they landed. Brushing off the snowflakes, using their staves for balance as they walked into the castle.

She was about to shout a Hello? before thinking better on it. Squatters would have to be outright mad to sit in the Eyrie, of all places; and during the winter, of all seasons. Though Sansa wasn’t fearful of those: a terrible fear filled her, a dread pulling her chest down towards the valley floor hundreds of feet below. What if something lurked in these quiet, frozen walls? Something like that monster that ate the guard up by Queenscrown (and who knew how many other poor guards, or farmers, or good gods children, had succumbed to the terrors of Winter). They were too far south for any of that, Sansa told herself. He cannot find me here. Idly, her fingers brushed against the simple pin at her throat. Winter didn’t know where she was. They were fine. They were.

“Where do you think she would stay, grandmother?” she asked the older witch. Their feet didn’t make much sound on the narrow carpet over the stones, but the quiet pat pat of their staves echoed like sword strikes in the courtyard back home. There was little noise this far up, no birds or whistling of trees or even the mundane activity of life. Nothing, save for the wind billowing through cracks in the stones or through loose panes of windows. It was almost like the lure of hundreds of ghosts, calling out for no one in particular. Was her aunt one of them now…?

Olenna tsk ed, though not at Sansa (it felt like it, though, like a wave of her hand at the thought. Royce said Lysa wasn’t dead. So she couldn’t be. They had to learn what happened. She couldn’t be dead). Another: tsk tsk tsk tsk. They echoed in the hall. It was just a sound the woman made when she was thinking (if the woman knew she did it or not, Sansa didn’t ask). “It’s hard to
say,” Olenna finally answered. “Anyone with half a brain would have descended down to the Gates for winter. She was – is – your aunt, though. Where do you think she would have holed herself up?”

*I wish I knew*, Sansa thought. *I wish I knew a lot of things*. Some of which she was about to find out. The promise of truths staved off the gnawing fear in her stomach.

They stood in the main entrance (the *true* entrance, not the one where people finally finished their ascent up the Lance. That room was drear). Sconces long cold and tapestries heavy with dust lined the walls. Sansa tried to remember the last time her and her family visited the Vale. Before Bran was alive, she thought. Or maybe he had just been born, but too small to brave the harsh climb up the Giant’s Lance. Which was a pity – Sansa knew how much he would have loved climbing Stone and Snow and Sky, all the way up to the Eyrie proper.

She shook the idea out of her head.

Sansa walked over to one of many marbled columns. There were blue veins twisting through the white stone, almost like it and the whole of the Eyrie itself had been frozen. She left a gloved hand tracing over a particularly twisting vein as she said, “I’m not sure. I haven’t been here in a long while. And I haven’t seen my aunt Lysa in nearly as much time.”

“Hm,” Olenna began, and finished. She lit up the end of her stave, a warm halo of orange light blossoming out from the rosebuds. Sansa did the same with hers, thankful for the warmth that seeped through her fingers. Slowly they walked past the frozen marble columns and past tapestries faded with the Arryn crest: a white falcon flying past a sliver of moon. Sansa hadn’t seen any falcons on their flight up.


Sansa licked her lips. “I don’t remember much. She and my mother had a– a sort of fight, I think, nearly a decade ago. And my mother fell ill to the cold— or so my lord father wishes me to believe. Only, with each passing day, Sansa was seeing it more as a kind lie than anything else.— and my aunt fled Winterfell with a babe in her stomach. I have neither seen nor heard from her since.”

“Not even a single raven?”

She shook her head. “No. Not a word.”

They were nearing the end of the main entrance. A hall stretched on either side of of them, both of them dark and cold. Sansa gripped her stave with both hands, tightly. She wished it could heat up more than her fingers, barely tickling up her arms to the elbows. Her heart was a frozen thing for many days now. Sansa watched the white puffs of her breath as she looked down one narrow hall, then the other.

Olenna perched on the edge of a white wood bench (it wasn’t weirwood, that Sansa knew). The arms were inlaid with burnished bronze, the same crest carved out of metal. The older witch stretched out her legs in front of her. It was many, many, many miles from Highgarden. Though Sansa couldn’t help but think it a ruse to waste time, even a few minutes. “I should hope you know that despite the way she shows it, Old Nan does care for you. And she does regret what she’s done.”

*Then why hasn’t she said it as blatantly?* Sansa said as much, though kinder.

Olenna huffed a laugh. The edge of her shawl swayed with the movement. “Oh, child. Trust
me when I say after many, many years, some witches grow brash instead. And I don’t blame her, in truth. She… Well, she hadn’t the chance to say farewell to her friends.” A faraway look overtook Olenna then, one that made Sansa wonder where she had gone. And: whether or not Olenna was lucky enough to say goodbye before the Dragons burnt her own friends. Sansa shuddered at not knowing the fate of Jeyne or Margaery or the tens of other witches her age. Even Mariya, just shy of her fourteenth name-day. A horrid image: flames overtaking the little witch’s smiles, her skin sloughing off as people laughed in the distance. Sansa shuddered again.

Seconds passed. They listened to the whistling of wind through the halls, to their own heartbeats. If Sansa listened hard enough, she could make sense of the words the ghosts were desperately trying to say “Please don’t lie to me,” Sansa began, staring forward. “Will I… Will everything be alright, in the end?”

Olenna was looking forward, too. One of her gnarled hands spun her stave against the stone floor, so slowly. The other was fisted in her skirts. Sansa counted the seconds and counted the spots on the woman’s hands. How old was she? Decades. Centuries? Did witches live that long? Or did they die – by nature, by a hoard of the frenzied – first. Or, taken by a god who thought little of human life, but rather their own selfish selves. Or smothered beneath snow. Or eaten alive by a thing.

Finally: “I can’t say. I hope. For your sake, and for everyone’s.”

There it was again. That uncertainty that sat heavier than a flat-out No did. Sansa bit the inside of her lips, almost until she tasted the sour metal of fear.

The old witch spoke before the weight dragged Sansa down to the valley floor. “I think it might be best to split up. I’ll take that hall—” she pointed with her chin, “–and you can take that one. The Eyrie isn’t too large; I can’t imagine it taking us long to scour through it all.”

Sansa looked out the nearest window Frost blurred her view of outside. “You’re right,” she said finally, turning back to Olenna. “But we should meet back in, say, an hour? If we haven’t found her by then. And yell if we see something.” For good or for bad.

The old woman nodded. “Good, good. Glad you’ve still got your head, despite what the old fart says about you.”

That irked Sansa a little (they’re talking about me behind my back). Though, it eased slightly knowing that Olenna and Old Nan constantly chided the other for being old. They were. She ignored it as she stood and simply said, “I’ll head this way then.”

Olenna nodded, and they split ways.

Olenna was right: the Eyrie was small, so much smaller on the inside than on the out. That isn’t to say it was the size of a broom closet, or even the Gates of the Moon. It was a castle, for starters, and any lord would be loathe to make their castle minute. Still, there seemed to be an infinite amount of doors – the rooms were a fraction of the size of her own room back in Winterfell – and all of them were empty.

She passed through the Sept. It stretched from east to west. A single strip of window was set into the roof and down the far walls, tracing the contour of the sun as it moved from dawn to dusk. It shone brilliantly through the glass, even through the frost, turning everything a soft blue. Statues of the new gods stood around her, one in each corner and the rest spaced evenly against the long wall between thin windows. They were taller than the ones in the little sept in Winterfell. But they were colder, too. There were no hot springs beneath the stones of the Eyrie to make the castle feel alive.
Feel welcoming. The gods stared down at Sansa with their unmoving, frozen eyes. Sansa watched the sun trace a line down the center of the room.

She continued down her half of the castle, carefully keeping an ear out for Olenna. Occasionally, she heard the rumble of a door slamming shut. There was the wind, a constant susurrus of ghosts. Her own footsteps and the patter of her stave. But nothing else.

The hour was nearly up, she figured, when her feet stopped her in front of an iron door, wrought in the shape of the Arryn crest. In the spaces between metal was glass. And through the glass, Sansa saw it.

The godswood.

Not nearly the same as the godswood in Winterfell; there wasn’t even a weirwood tree up here. Though, she remembered her father when they last visited (maybe it was him, or perhaps one of the household?) saying that the earth this far up was too rocky and shallow to hold the heavy roots of the bone-white tree. Still, Sansa tried to imagine it. It’s ivory branches reaching out to touch every wall surrounding the woods, its blood-red leaves brushing higher than the roofs above. Maybe even reaching as high as the tallest tower – Sansa craned her head up to stare at the point of the seven towers surrounding her. They were like trees of their own, without branches or leaves. But towering above her, silently watching all just the same.

There was some snow covering the ground here, covering the statues as shapeless lumps whose arms pointed at nothing. Some patches of ice littered wherever dirt and browned grasses peeked through. That surprised Sansa most: how little snow there actually was. This deep in the season, Sansa imagined all of the Eyrie to be covered in snow, drowning in it. She couldn’t help but think the lack of it here (and throughout Westeros?) was because Winter itself was coalescing it up North. For me.

It took no time at all before she found herself in the center of the courtyard. She was alone. And she had been alone the last time, too, that Sansa walked through a godswood. At least, she thought she had been alone.

As if by instinct, her feet spun around, slowly, her eyes taking in every inch of the woods. Staring at the mix of snow and brown dirt beneath, waiting for shoots of ice to spring up as they had done before. They didn’t. No roses of ice, no roses of nature, either. There weren’t even flowers here. But whether that was because of the weather, or because of ill-maintenance (or possibly both), Sansa couldn’t say. The few trees and bushes that did live seemed to do so out of a stubborn spite. Look at us, they said, we won’t die no matter how hard you try.

It was warmer here, too. The high walls blocking out the brunt of the wind. They were their, the murmuring of the ghosts, if she listened hard enough. Soft snow floated down atop her. Leaving Sansa in a world that was still.

He can’t find me, she told herself, touching her throat again. With any luck, Old Nan threw the trout deep into the Narrow Sea by now, or even tied it to an unassuming branch in the Wolfswood. Winter would be looking for her.

Please, what do you want

You

Sansa shivered, so violently she dropped her stave. She felt the spray of saltwater on her cheeks, heard the screaming of passengers below. Saw herself, hundreds of feet tall, made of ice. A
proclamation of love.

She took in a single, long breath of icy air. Let it go. Bent down to pick up her stave. She’d cried enough last night (and this morning) about that horrid dream. She needed to tell Olenna about it. Old Nan, too. There had been plenty of time on the hours-long journey to the Vale. Only, everytime Sansa opened her mouth to say it, the truth of what she had done froze the words in her throat.

*Because of me, they’re dead.*

“You *should* be dead.”

Sansa spun, her boots digging in the snow and dirt. It was a ragged voice that echoed around the cloistered walls of the godswood: *dead dead you should dead be dead.*

Only, there wasn’t anyone here. There weren’t too many places to hide in a godswood so sparse as this: the trees too spindly to be much cover, the bushes barely more than a jumble of twigs and roots. Sansa circled where she stood, staring up at the various windows and balconies jutting above the courtyard. Maybe it was Olenna playing a cruel joke on her. Maybe it was just one of the ghosts.

A twig snapped.

Sansa stepped back, clutching tightly to her stave. The heat that wound through the carved whorls was gone, replaced by a similar cold that raged inside and outside her chest.

*He’s found me.*

Again, and again: Winter always found her. In the North or in her dreams. She wasn’t free of it.

Snow sloughed from a statue in a single *whump*. Sansa aimed her stave, expecting to see the whirls of ice and snow, the dark silhouette of a god.

It was her instead.

A wild ferocity filled her face: deep blue eyes darkened by the circles beneath; auburn hair pulled back but tangled, strands poking out every which way; skirts beneath a heavy brown fur, all of which looked unwashed. Lysa Arryn née Tully.

“You think you can just show up.” Her aunt stepped out from behind the statue (a slightly woman, wearing an intricately carved gown and a sombre expression). “Here. *Here!*” She was so close now Sansa could see the shadow of the lines in her face. She wasn’t *old*, like Olenna or Old Nan. But she looked it—looked so much older, so much more tired, than she should be. “Show up, and take from me!” There wasn’t a shred of rationality to her aunt, that Sansa knew. If it wasn’t in her words (the words of a madwoman), it was in the eyes. They barely blinked. “*You always do this!* You *always* take what should be *mine*!”

“Aunt Lysa, please, I-”

“No!” She swiped at Sansa then, Sansa jumping back just enough to avoid her aunt’s claws. Lysa howled, the echo rumbling long after.

“Aunt Lysa, calm down, please, I’m not-”
“Calm down!?” Lysa roared. She lunged for Sansa. They tumbled in the snow.

Sansa couldn’t concentrate enough to use her magic, fighting off her aunt’s claws from raking down her face, or her legs from kneeling the breath from her. She was yelling unintelligibly. And now, Sansa wished she had asked one of Winterfell’s knights, or even Arya, to teach her how to use her stave as a weapon, rather than as a channel for her magic. Too late for that. Sansa swung it blindly and meekly. It left a resounding thwump against a statue, snow shuddering off stone. Another swing, just as her aunt’s nails dug into her jaw, and Lysa stumbled off. She was wild and mad, but she was determined.

Reason, maybe? There must be some part of Lysa that was capable of reasoning to. “Please, stop!” Sansa yelled at her aunt, narrowly dodging another strike. Throwing one of her own: low enough on her legs that Lysa stumbled into the snow. She might have bit her tongue. “Aunt Lysa, listen to me! I’m not my mother, I’m Sansa. Your niece. Please, please calm down. I need to ask you—

“Nothing!” Lysa was scrambling up to her feet. Specks of blood shot out of her mouth as she yelled. “You are nothing, and you deserve nothing. You don’t deserve him!”

Sansa swung a leg over her stave and shot up into the air. In the air, she could reason with her aunt. In the air, she could be free from her wild clutches—

—Lysa grabbed for her boot. Just enough to make Sansa falter, just enough to jump up and firmly grab the other. Sansa fell off her stave, the wood clattering against a statue somewhere. Oh gods.

She was on her in a flash, legs heavy against her chest, hands digging into her throat. Sansa couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t breathe. Her aunt was so much heavier, so much more determined. To attack, to kill.

To kill.

“He was supposed to be mine!” Lysa screamed into Sansa’s face, spittle falling like frozen darts on her skin. Her aunt’s fingers dug deep into her throat. I can’t breathe. “Mine mine mine, and you took him from me!”

Sansa tried to say Please, but her aunt’s fingers were squeezing. Sansa clawed at her arms, legs kicking air. She saw her stave, too far to reach. Sansa tried to channel her magic into her hands: calm her down, push her off, send a roar of wind to knock her away. Only, it was hard to concentrate on that when she was close, so close, to passing out.

Please.

“You deserve to die!”

And Lysa squeezed tighter.

Whack.

Lysa went flying. Sansa choked down a huge lungful of air. Another, another and another. It froze her throat, her lungs, but gods if it didn’t taste wonderful.

Sansa half-crawled, half-ran towards her stave, lifting it in front of her to shield herself as she turned. Olenna was there, one foot on Lysa’s chest, her own stave glowing white-hot between the vines, pointed at Lysa’s face.
“Don’t kill her!” Sansa heard herself saying (screaming) as she ran and shoved Olenna away. Lysa was mad – was about to kill her own niece – but she didn’t deserve to die. Sansa stared down at the crumpled form of her aunt. Sansa’s breaths were heavy puffs of white from her lips. Her throat and lungs felt like they were burning.

Olenna adjusted her own furs, observing the woman lying between them. Lysa wasn’t dead, not from the way her left arm was twitching. Thank the gods. “She’s not dead,” the witch said. To Sansa, “Are you alright?”

Was she? Was she ever, ever since that fateful night in the copse of trees, dancing to the tune of night and snow. When Winter willed the snows to look like her; when it formed roses for her; when it shaped a glacier in her image and slammed it against a ship full of innocent people. For her. All of it was for her, for the foolish girl who danced and danced and danced.

Oh, of course she wasn’t alright.

“Yes, I’m...I’m fine.” Sansa managed, breathing in another heavy gulp of air. Her heart thundered in her ears. I’m fine, except my own flesh and blood wanted to kill me…

“We’d best take her inside, make a remedy for her mind. It should soothe the sickness enough for us to hear her story.”

Sansa nodded, her voice gone. Her throat felt raw, too; she’d need to make a salve for herself, too. Together, they hauled the limp body of Lysa Arryn through the Eyrie, and ground herbs – skullcap and chamomile and valerian. Carefully, they fed it down her throat. And they sat there, waiting, watching the sun slide down the opposite wall, for the story.

Only, it wasn’t a story. It was the truth. The truth of the first night Winter danced with a mortal woman, and claimed her as his.

* * *

“It’ll wear off soon,” Olenna said, doing her best to ease the guilt sitting low in Sansa’s stomach (or something else? Whatever it was it was heavy and sour).

Sansa nodded. She sipped on her fourth cup of tea, grateful for the burn slide down her throat. Around it, was a bandage soaked in a mixture of comfrey, mullein, and witch hazel. Last she looked through a mirror, the bruises were nearly gone, faded into a sickly yellow. There was a scar on her right cheek, trailing down to follow the line of her jaw before disappearing. Even with the salve, it was still red (not bleeding, at least). Sansa couldn’t help but think it to be an arrow, pointing directly towards the red off-color of her cheeks, where Winter gripped her.

It was past evening already. They sat, watching the sun descend below the castle through a window, painting the sky brilliant orange. There were only leftover streaks of it left, the rest of the sky overcome by darkness. And this many hundreds of feet up, Sansa could see every single star.

Sansa had opened and shut her mouth no less than six times as they waited. Her mind was nagging her – tell her of your dream, of the god that stops at nothing to make you his – just as violently as her mind was pulling her back. Because (and it was a foolish idea) if Sansa pretended it was just a dream, she could pretend all those people didn’t drown in the frozen waters.

She finished the tea, setting the cup with a quiet thud on a nearby table. They were in the closest room with a bed to the godwood, one that Sansa had peered into earlier that afternoon. They ought to have taken Lysa to her own rooms, much larger and accommodating. But neither of them
brokered the idea, and so they sat in the cramped quarters of a nobleman’s guest chambers.

Her fingers twirled the cup round and round where it sat on the table. *Now or never*. Sansa turned to Olenna—

“Robin…”

They jumped. Then gave each other a single look of *Did I imagine that or not?*, before another weak “Robin” filled the air. Both witches turned towards the woman, lying prone on the featherbed with furs piled atop.

Lysa’s eyelids were fluttering, her mouth moving silently. Like she was trying to wake up, to speak, but something kept pulling her back into sleep.

She flung up suddenly – Sansa and Olenna jumping back in their chairs – her back ramrod straight, her hands flinging this way and that. Looking for something. Muttering nonsense as she fumbled through the furs, looking looking looking.

They each took one of her hands, holding her steady. Trickling magic into her blood to mix with the herbs. Slowly, Lysa’s frantic searching dulled down – she wasn’t pulling against their grips. She fell back down onto the bed with a heavy *fwump*.

A second passed, ten. Lysa was blinking slowly up at the ceiling. Her mouth was still moving, but she was calm. At least, her body was calm enough. No more fear that Lysa would spring up and strangle Sansa again, not whilst their magic worked itself way through her.

“Ask your questions, girl,” Olenna said, not keeping her eyes off of Lysa. Sansa wanted to argue, but: this was her aunt who had become unwell. This was her. This was her story that she had danced into.

Sansa licked her lips, thinking. Watching as Lysa’s eyes flitted back and forth, eyelids half closed. She wouldn’t be awake for long, nor would she be mentally able to answer whatever questions Sansa had. She would need to be quick and precise. “Aunt Lysa,” she began, drawing her aunt’s attention towards her. Forgoing her manners, for a moment: “What happened ten years ago when you visited my mother.”

Lysa was staring at Sansa, but also *not* staring at her. Worse: Sansa knew exactly who her aunt thought she was looking at. The way her brows were furrowed. The whisper of a sneer on her thin, blue lips. Lysa didn’t *see* Sansa, but Catelyn. But the woman who *took him from her*.

Olenna was still holding onto the Lysa, still slowly fueling her with calm.

Sansa repeated, “Tell me what happened.”

So Lysa did, slowly, with the slurred speech of someone drunk. And with the vehemence of a younger sister jealous of her older. And in her eyes: pure, unadulterated hatred. That, the herbs or magic couldn’t feign.

Lysa had come to visit her sister, to tell her the wonderful news in person that she was with child. Her husband – the great Jon Arryn – had become the great *late* Jon Arryn, though not without leaving his mark upon the world in the shapeless babe in Lysa’s stomach. Eddard was kind enough to smile for the woman, to give her the platitudes of *congratulations*, before retiring to his study for most of Lysa’s stay. Jon Arryn had been a dear friend of his, and the loss of a friend was never easy to swallow.
And Lysa had whispered to Catelyn, stories they once loved as children. Reminded Catelyn how they used to cover themselves with furs and light a single candle, reading through the dust old books about shining knights, and fair princesses, and tales of gods who fell for beautiful human women. Lysa always imagined herself to be one of them. Always wanted to be swept

Oh, because how she always envied her sister. How her father loved them both, but loved Catelyn more How Catelyn had set a bouquet of flowers springing up from the cattails by the lake outside Riverrun: magic. Lysa had magic, too, but it was faint, so faint that she might not as well have it at all. If she was lucky, she could spring a single flower to life.

*Let’s go watch the dance*, Lysa cooed at her sister one night when they sat in the solar, reading and talking and sharing a platter of cheese.

*Sure, the summer dance should be around when your babe is born*, Catelyn answered, thoughtfully and strategically, like she always had been.

*No*, Lysa said, standing up. *I want to watch the winter dance. I heard your Old Nan speaking of it. It’s tonight. I want to see it*.

(“She was there?” Sansa interrupted Lysa. Her aunt blinked, perhaps forgetting where she was, and who she was with, and why she was lying in a bed surrounded by two witches. Sansa shook her head, silently telling her to continue).

*Please please please please!*

*Fine*. It took so much cowing – the candles were pooling in their own wax, the cheese was gone save for a single square – but finally Catelyn submitted to her sister. *But the moment it’s done*, she added, *we head straight back. I don’t want you endangering your child*.

Lysa didn’t so much remember the child in her stomach at the moment. The dance! Oh, the dance, it was going to be so wonderful. She was going to dance with the gods! She was going to be swept away into his arms! She was the beautiful maiden that would catch the eyes of the gods, and she was going to live happily. To live like a queen.

She clutched tightly onto her sister as Catelyn flew westward in through a starless and moonless night. A shred of orange and red crested the Sunset Sea in the distance. But unlike the sun, Lysa couldn’t hide the burst of colors swirling inside her. The smile didn’t fade from her lips, not even as the wind whipped against their cloaks and skirts.

Old Nan had alluded to the location of the clearing, too busy attending to the villagers on the changing of seasons that she didn’t attend the sisters. Which was fine – Lysa couldn’t imagine the embarrassment if someone like that old witch had caught the eye of the god! Besides, she was a sour old lady, no matter how useful her potions were.

They saw the firelight, a circle of it peeking through the canopy of leaves. Catelyn descended far enough away, had barely touched the ground before Lysa jumped off her stave and began tumbling in the dark towards the clearing. She *heard* the dance first, before she rounded the edge of the lanterns.

*Oh, how marvelous!* A little too somber for her taste (where were all the cheering crowds like during the changing for summer?), but Lysa couldn’t help but swirl and dance on the edge of the copse. Catelyn caught up with her then, warning her to stay on the outside of the lanterns. She admitted not having seen the dance before, either, but was cautious enough. Always cautious, Catelyn was!
But it’s so much fun, don’t you think! She said to her sister. Lysa’s feet swung this way and that, copying the movement of the five dancers. She felt the beat of their sticks rumble against her very soul. Don’t you want to dance along, too! Come along!

She grabbed Catelyn’s arms, and they danced and danced and danced to the beat of night and winter. Her sister tried to pull free, talked over the beat of the dancers: warning this, don’t do that.

Oh, you’re no fun, Cat. Lysa let her go. She looked at the dancers — they either hadn’t noticed them, or didn’t rightly care, too entranced in their own dance.

Only… There’s only five dancers! Lysa clapped her hands. This is it, she told herself. He’s waiting for me.

Stop!

Catelyn’s voice echoed against that constant beating of the dancers as Lysa swung herself into that sixth spot.

She danced, and danced, and danced. The night was cold but Lysa was too hot to feel its chill. Wind swirled leaves at her feet, and she kept moving, kept smiling, kept dancing.

We have to go. Now!

Catelyn had her arm then, jerking Lysa out of the circle.

No! Lysa pulled on her arm, but her sister’s grip was strong. She was being pulled out of the dancer’s lines, towards the circle of lanterns. Out of the dance, and out of the story she so desperately wanted. Why do you ruin everything!

The fires flickered behind the glass. The winds picked up, sending their skirts in a frenzied dance of their own against their legs.

She turned. The dancers were still moving, but there! There, where she once stood, the shifting, moving silhouette of the god. It was staring at them — at her! — and took a step forward. Another. The wind was so violent now, Lysa couldn’t hear the clacking of the sticks or the frantic beating of her heart.

Catelyn was still tugging her away, saying (or yelling) things. Lysa didn’t listen, didn’t care what her sister had to say. She dug her feet into the dirt. No! She wasn’t going to leave, not now, not when the god was so close to picking her as his bride.

It stared at her (she thought, it didn’t have eyes), and Lysa reached for him.

Except: the god didn’t pick her.

The god picked her.

Lysa screamed. Lashed herself onto him, onto her sister — No no no no no. The wind tossed her back, knocking over a lantern. She saw the moonless starless sky peeking through the leaves above. And she saw her wonderful story slip away.

(Sansa saw it then, missed in the flurry of the fight earlier. Hadn’t seen it as Lysa lay, healing. The same sort of fury that wrapped Lysa’s pale arms. Sansa shivered. She swore — for a blink, gone in the next — that she was back by Queenscrown, Winter’s icy fingers caressing her cheeks. His voice, rumbling through her ribs and echoing in her head, like he was talking to her in her mind and
not through the shifting form of a body that was learning: *You are mine*).

Quiet filled the bedchamber in the Eyrie. Outside, against the walls and the windows, the ghosts were still whispering to them. Only, Sansa didn’t hear them, not anymore.

She stared at her aunt. There was a faraway look in her eyes, remembering that night in her mind as well as she was recounting it with her words. A trace of a smile touched her thin lips – like the Lysa in her head was one who had *won*. Who had ‘rightfully’ earned the favor of the god, and its love, and all the horrors that came with the deity of snow and ice and death.

There wasn’t a smile on Sansa’s face. There wasn’t the faintest trace of anything of that ilk on Sansa’s lips, or in her heart. Something squeezed her chest until she was sure to suffocate.

Lysa was there. Her words – *he was supposed to be mine*. Her fury – *he was supposed to be mine*. Her madness – *he was supposed to be mine*. Lysa was there when Catelyn perished in the clutches of Winter.

And Lysa didn’t save her sister.

Sansa stood up, her chair scraping against the stone floor. Its echo was so harsh both the other women flinched, hands halfway to covering their ears. They stared at Sansa: Lysa, free from the clutches of her misremembered fantasies; Olenna, a wry grimace on her own lips.

Sansa’s fists were clutched so tightly, she thought she might pierce through the flesh. A terrible thought clawed up her throat: *You should have been the one that died*.

Sansa forced her legs to walk to the other room, hands fisting in her own hair. *You should have been the one that died you should have. Not my mother. Not me.*

She hated the thoughts.

Furs rustled in the other room, the quiet slap of flesh on flesh. “You, witch! Please,” Lysa began, clawing for Olenna. Acting as though Sansa – or Catelyn – was gone. Or maybe forgetting about her, blind only to her imagination. A *foolish* imagination. “Please, please, tell me. My son. Tell me he’s fine and healthy and safe.”

Sansa felt something, something she didn’t think (or didn’t *want*) to feel for her unwell aunt. Sympathy. Or maybe sadness. Or both.

*She has a son*… Sansa had forgotten.

Olenna’s gaze flitted between the woman on the bed and Sansa, who was now peeking out from the doorframe in the other room. There wasn’t hope on the old woman’s face, not even the false sense of hope that witches were clever with. Olenna, slowly and with hesitance, shook her head once. *No*.

Lysa wailed out, collapsing into the furs.

Olenna left the woman to swallow in her grief, meeting Sansa at the threshold of the antechamber. Sansa – her gaze frozen on her aunt’s crumpled form – whispered to the witch (though it wasn’t necessary, not with the way her aunt was crying. Screaming. Cursing the gods). “Her son…?”

Again: Olenna shook her head, a small motion, but heavy with the truth. “I found him, before I heard the commotion in the godswood. He’s been gone for many years. I… If it weren’t for the
Sansa felt guilty for the horrid thoughts she just had. For wishing her aunt had died instead of her mother. For cursing her aunt. She hated that she was guilty as much as she hated that she wished she wasn’t.

Olenna leaned against the doorjamb, withered hand lying atop the iron handle. She was making her tsk tsk tsk sounds again, quieter. Working out her own onslaught of possibilities and emotions and what if’s. Slowly, she lifted her eyes to Sansa’s – it was so dim, Sansa couldn’t make out the soft green of her eyes. “You’d best get some sleep, Sansa,” Olenna said finally. “There’ll be plenty of time on the flight back tomorrow to dwell on the truths we learned today.”

But I can’t, Sansa wanted to say. I haven’t slept properly in days.

And now, with the truths and their own onslaught of questions – with the unfortunate truth that they still had no idea how to get rid of Winter and its affections towards Sansa – she was less likely to sleep than ever.

Sansa ignored it as she asked, “Will we be flying back to Highgarden tomorrow, then?”

Olenna nodded, once and slowly. “I should think so. It’s nightfall already. Though we’ll need to bring your aunt down to the Gates. As much as she’s... unwell, it would be best for her to be unwell among other people, than cooped up here.”

Nestor Royce’s words echoed in Sansa’s head: Please tell me if you find him.

He wasn’t concerned about Lysa (perhaps a bit, enough. But not as much for her son).

Another stab of pain sliced through her chest. Sansa ignored it as best as she could. “What about you? Don’t you need to sleep?”

Olenna waved her off with a hand. “I’m old, if you haven’t forgotten. I’ll be fine taking care of your aunt. You’re the one that needs sleep.” Because Olenna had chided her several times on the long flight to the Vale. Sansa had nearly slipped from her stave too often for comfort.

She nodded. “Good night, grandmother.”

“Good night.”

Only, it wasn’t a good night.

* * *

Where is she, Sansa heard herself think. Only, it wasn’t herself, couldn’t have been. She was in the Vale, high up in the white-walled Eyrie. Waiting for dawn.

Sansa looked down at her hands, her body, but there wasn’t anything there. Wind whistled through the trees. Snow fell all around her, a neverending cascade of white. It surrounded her, too, all that white. Sansa could have sworn she had been here before, looking up at the Wall by the light of the moon and stars, standing in a sea of trees. Somewhere, faintly off in the distance, she heard the lapping of waves.

She hadn’t been here, of course. At least, not from this side of the Wall.

Where is she?
Sansa wasn’t Sansa, not in this dream.

She was Winter.

She was seeing what he was seeing, thinking his thoughts.

It unnerved her.

Darkness filled her vision for a heartbeat before it was replaced by the dimness of nature. Black silhouettes surrounded her, naked branches mixed with those heavy with snow. Everything was still.

Darkness again. The godswood. Not in the Eyrie, but back home. Winterfell. The long, thick branches of the weirwood tree shooting up into the sky. Blood-red leaves littered the fresh snow. Beside the lake, Sansa saw a silhouette of a man – her father? – before Winter grumbled. The man turned, too late to see the god.

Darkness. A river flowed beside her, its surface frozen. A towering castle stood at the edge of the lake, faint squares of yellow flicking against the massive black. Cattails licked where her feet should be.

Darkness. The golden crenels of Queenscrown glistened against the moonlight. Snow covered its base, the lake entirely frozen. Sansa heard a roar – two, behind her, but when she turned to look, Winter had jumped again.

It wasn’t until she stood in the godswood of Winterfell again, staring at the carved face of the weirwood reflected in the pool (the man was gone now, the godswood empty save for the god), that Sansa knew where Winter was shifting between.

*It’s all the places we met*.

Only, some she didn’t recognize.

A clearing in the forest, half littered with snow. The edge of a village, smoke trailing up from houses that were buried with snow. The Trident, each of the forking rivers flowing steadily in the darkness. The Wall, glittering silver and blue, though staring at it from the south this time (Sansa could just make out the shape of Castle Black).

When Winter jumped in front a trio of buildings, unlit torches standing watch outside, a miles of fields beyond with crops heavy with snow, Sansa felt her body (her real body, lying in a chilly room with a roaring fire and whatever leftover furs they found, high above the valley floor in the Vale), felt it shiver. Heard herself gasp.

*No*.

The little snowman was hardly more than a massive blob of white, standing proud in front of the meek farmhouse.

Winter stared at it, before shoving a hand through its face (where its face had once been, smiling with rock and twigs) and ripped it apart.

*Whereeee* . Its voice trailed off into a howling wind. Animals whinied in the barn beside the homestead. Winter ignored those, caught by the flickering orange and yellow painting the snow in front of the house.
Don’t kill them, please. Not Winter: Sansa. Sansa was hoping whatever this thing that tied them together was enough to reason with what little shred of humanity Winter had. That is – if gods had humanity.

Winter cocked his head at the scene inside, watching the children huddled beneath a single blanket sing by the fire. The. Sansa recognized the tune – it was the same one they had sung as they built their snowman. The same one that heralded Sansa into their life. The last song they sang before their brother succumbed completely to the cold.

Winter knocked at the window with thin fingers of ice. The children looked up at her, it. Sansa was yelling at them to stay inside, to call for their parents. Where were they? Sleeping in the next room? Or had the winter…

The boy cracked the door open a fraction. “H-Hello?” From inside, Sansa heard the girl tell him to close it.

What are you singing, Winter asked them. It was the same shapeless voice, the one that echoed inside her very skull as Winter held onto her face.

The littlest one (what were their names again? They were…Sofie. Yes? Sofie, and Alesan. And their other brother Jon…) stared at Sansa. At Winter. Alesan was too young to be just afraid. He was curious, to the dismay of his sister. Sofie had her arm in front of him, blocking Winter.

“Song?” the little boy asked.

Yes, that song. I’ve heard it before. The last time I was here.

Sofie hissed, “Let’s go back inside.” She was wise enough to be afraid. Sansa wanted to yell at them to go back, to go get their parents. Only, it wasn’t Sansa they were talking to, or her voice they were listening to.

Winter turned his gaze from the girl down to the boy. Little one, what is that song. Not so much a question; a demand. Sansa could feel cold, saw the snowflakes swirling around the three of them as they stood on the porch, the firelight illuminating the children from behind. Between their legs and the door, the dog came padding to stand between the children and Winter. She barked once.

Sofie held onto the dog’s – Ruth’s – neck as she stammered, “It’s n-nothing. Just a song.” At the same time, Alesan answered, “‘How to Make a Man.’ A traveller taught us last summer.”

That caught Winter’s attention. It turned towards the boy, bending down to stare at Alesan eye-to-eye. Ruth barked again, but a dog was nothing to a god. A man? Tell me, children, how do you make a man? Winter sounded...eager?

The boy piped up first, before his sister could yell him to be quiet: “Iron enough to make a nail.” Looked to Sofie, waiting. Seconds passed before Alesan nudged his sister with an elbow, and Sansa heard how Sofie’s voice cracked as she continued the next line: “Lime enough to, uh to paint a wall.” She was shaking, and not from the cold. Or, not just from it.

They sang the rest of it, a tune one that Sansa remembered hearing as a child. There was water to make a man, too, and sulfur, and gold, and all sorts of things. Almost like a recipe from one of Sansa’s books. Only, it was just a story. Just a song.

So was the story of Winter and Summer.

So was the new story, of Winter and Sansa.
Yes. Yes! Sansa heard Winter say when they had run through most of the song, so emphatically that the wind picked up into a torrent that pushed the children closer towards each other, their thin clothes whipping against their skinny legs. The dog began barking louder.

Winter – so quickly – grabbed hold of Sofie’s shoulders. She yelled. Sansa could taste her fear. Tell me, little one. If I become a man, will my Summer love me?

“I…?” Sofie tried to wriggle free, but that only made Winter’s grip tighten. “I don’t...know…”

But she must. She must!

Sofie was a smart girl, though. The lie (or uncertain truth) fell easily from her lips: “Yes, yes! She’ll love you. She’ll never stop loving you.”

Sansa shivered as she slipped from the vision, her body finding solace in the warm lull of darkness. And in that, she heard Winter’s voice – so full of a maddening glee – echo in her head: I will make her love me.
“Are you certain what you saw in your dream?”

Sansa watched the ripples fall across Old Nan’s face. The image through water made the old witch look distorted, almost like the hideous portrayal of witches under the Dragons. Lines cragging her skin, eyes wild with sleeplessness (it was good, she thought, that the other witch was feeling guilty about it, too). She was staring at Sansa, and even with the hundreds of miles separating them, Sansa couldn’t help but feel that bubbling rage inside her.

Am I certain that the god of winter himself is not giving up his search for me, regardless what tricks we play on him? Or, am I certain that he is absolutely obsessed with making me his?

She swallowed the lump in her throat; or, tried to. Managed a simple, “Yes.” Unfortunately.

Even through the pan of water, Old Nan looked displeased. Her wrinkles were made deeper by the ripples spurred on by stray breezes through the hall. They sat in the dining hall, a tarnished plate filled with water on the table. There was hardly any food to eat, and what the Eyrie had to offer was either rock hard or spoiled or both. Sansa ignored the rumble in her stomach – she wasn’t hungry, really. She knew she should eat, and sleep, and all sorts of things to keep sane. But Sansa couldn’t bring herself to.

“Certainly it’s merely a portent of Winter, no?” Olenna was stretching out her legs in front of her, her fingers too. They cracked, each one in succession as she closed and opened them. Sansa shuddered at the sounds.

“So I would think,” Old Nan replied. The muted orange of sunrise was shining on the wall behind her, casting the witch in an unearthly glow. Sansa watched the same sun leave long streaks of light atop the trestle tables in the Eyrie. “Only, how would it know where to find Sansa in places she hadn’t been. Or…” She was talking to herself now, lips moving too slowly for thoughts.

“Luck, then, that Sansa hadn’t brought Winter down with her. I’d hate to see all the flowers wither under snow.”

“Yes.” Old Nan pursed her lips. She looked guilty. Good. “I had hoped for better results throwing the pin away. It worked, yes, but also not.”

“We still have time,” Olenna began. “But I can’t imagine there’s much left. We’re halfway through the winter season already. What were to happen should Winter not relinquish his hold on the world when it comes time to change seasons?”

No one answered.

They changed the course of the conversation, talking about Sansa as if she weren’t there.
Sansa half-minded. The other half of her was glad not to shoulder the heavy gaze of the witches scrutiny and questioning. She hadn’t mentioned explicitly what Winter was doing: finding a way for Sansa to love him. His chilling words sent a shiver tickling down her spine at the thought. Made the frozen outline of his ghostly fingers across her cheeks burn with cold. But, she hadn’t needed to explain explicitly what Winter was doing, what he was looking for. It was painfully obvious; had been, for weeks now.

She sang the song—iron enough to make a nail, lime enough to paint a wall...—half-listening to the witches throw ideas about, all of them concerning her without actually addressing Sansa.

On she sang in her head: Water enough to drown a dog, sulfur enough to stop the fleas... Though as she went through the lines, Sansa couldn’t help but hear each word through a different voice: the little children who stared at Winter, terrified; herself, as a child singing it as she skipping down to the little gardens to look at the flowers; Winter itself, its wavering words made of a thousand voices.

“...a blessing it had wits enough not to kill those poor children.”

But he did, Sansa thought bitterly. That poor child, Jon, died because of the cold. And the knight eaten alive by some monstrosity. And the crops that didn’t survive the harsh frost, nor the animals that succumbed to the cold.

And the ship...

“Ship?”

Sansa hadn’t meant for it to slip between her lips. But it had, and both old Nan and Olenna were staring at her. Worse was the look that Old Nan gave them through the water. “Oh. Uh…”

“‘Oh’, what, girl?”

It was merely a dream, Sansa told herself, lied to herself, as she bit the inside of her cheek. But to say as much to the witches would be foolish. The fact that she hadn’t brought it up yet was foolish. But she heard them: the screams of tens or maybe hundreds of people as the glacier hit the boat. The ringing in her ears as she plummeted into the icy water, down down down.

Sansa kept her voice as steady as she could as she recounted her earlier dream (not the first, of course. There had been so many dreams since that dance, Sansa often mixed them with the reality of seeing Winter standing in the godswood, or of his frozen fingers caressing her skin. Not to mention the fact that Winter was looking for her like he had been with her own mother...). Sansa, unfortunately, could not steady the crack in her words as she got to the part where Winter’s gift smashed into the ship.

She wiped away the tears forming beneath her eyes.

They didn’t speak for several long seconds.

“Well,” Old Nan began. The soft orange of sunrise transformed into a muted white—there must be an army of clouds in the North right now. And with it, snow, so much snow. “I don’t believe this is something at all that we can dismiss.”

“Nor do I,” Olenna chimed in.

They didn’t chide her for not mentioning this earlier, of which Sansa was grateful. Old Nan
continued, “But can we believe this to be the truth? As much as I am loathe to believe it… Still— Ah, yes?” Sansa saw that Old Nan was addressing someone beyond her own plate of water. There was a shuffle of her arm above the dish, words muffled through the water (by Old Nan’s intention?), and finally a loud *thwump* of the heavy wooden door closing, its echoes shooting ripples over the reflection.

There was a scroll in her wizened fingers, the seal indistinguishable in the shadows of her arm. Old Nan read it, and again, and again. And did not look pleased. Far from it.

“What’s the matter, Old Fart?” Olenna asked, *joking* at a time like this.

Old Nan didn’t bother addressing Olenna or the jape, instead staring only at Sansa. Sansa, meanwhile, felt the heavy weight in her stomach sink, dragging her through the floor and down down down to the bottom of the Giant’s Lance. “What was that ship’s name, girl, do you remember?”

Sansa’s throat was dry. *No*. “It was…” *No*. “No, I don’t remember seeing the name.”

“Is the name that important?” Olenna jumped in for Sansa. But she had to know, too. *No*.

Sansa heard her voice, small and weak and hardly a voice, hardly louder than the ghostly winds caressing the Eyrie’s walls. “Was it...true… My dream…”

The two older witches gave each other a cursory look through the water, but that second (or fraction of a second) was enough to tell Sansa everything.

No. Even in the back of her mind, Sansa wondered – hoped – that it was merely a dream.

No. Even in the darkness of closed eyes, or the silence of nature, Sansa could hear and feel the rumble of the ship cracking beneath the glacier. Heard the cries of hundreds of innocent people as she plummeted into the icy cold water.

No.

“Tell us again *exactly* what happened in your dream.”

She blinked. Her head was between her legs, hands clutching her hair so tightly it hurt. Sansa hadn’t realized she crumpled up where she sat beside Olenna. Wasn’t sure either if her pleas of *No* were said out loud or not. She couldn’t manage to look up at Olenna to see if it was true. That weight, that sinking feeling – Sansa wondered if, yes, it had the power to pull her hundreds upon hundreds of feet down.

Sansa wondered if she would let it.

Deep breath. In. out. *It’s not your fault*, she told herself. *It’s not your fault*.

A pity no one else would lie to her.

So Sansa recounted the dream in more detail, answering their interjecting questions with *I don’t know* or *I don’t remember*. All the while, she kept her hands tangled in her hair and her gaze glued to the stones beneath her feet.

“That confirms this report.” Old Nan said it so dryly, Sansa wanted to scream at her. She
didn’t. But gods, if she felt the rumble of the shout claw up her throat. Sansa swallowed it and the guilt, letting it eat at her from the inside out.

“What is in the report?” Olenna asked for Sansa. Because maybe, maybe there was a detail they were missing that would say Ah-ha! The dream was a dream, and Winter definitely did not slaughter (it was slaughter, Sansa listened to the screams, to the crashing of wood) all those people for her.

Old Nan read the scroll, brief as it was. A passenger ship bound for White Harbor never arrived, even with the delay cushion of being caught up in winter storms. They would have assumed the storms to be the reason (far worse than storms in years passed), except knights at Eastwatch saw the floating wreckage drift past last evening. They found the name of the ship floating on a jagged piece of hull, and no survivors. The raven arrived only that morning on tired wings.

There was no mention of a glacier in the shape of Sansa. There was no mention of how many people drowned in the waters.

There was no mention of a girl, crying and yelling at the god to make it all stop.

* * *

Flying down the Giant’s Lance with a half-conscious Lysa carried between the two of them was trickier than they imagined, especially with the howling winds that threatened to tear the woman off their staves, so high up they were. Olenna (jokingly) suggested tying the woman to one of their staves and let her dangle behind as they flew down. Sansa (though she didn’t vocalize it) wasn’t sure if the tincture of poppy and lavender was strong enough to keep Lysa from waking up mid-descent and freaking out, bound or not. It had worked last night, but the woman woke up at some point and began wailing.

Sansa also wasn’t sure if the tincture would calm her own nerves, too, to the point where Sansa could slip off her stave hundreds of feet in the air and not feel the rush of the earth rising up.

“What about…” Sansa trailed off as they double– and triple-checked the restraints. Based on her outrage last evening, the witches decided it would be best for Lysa to fly with Olenna, with Sansa providing backup beside. It was a short descent, yes, but it wouldn’t do any of them good to have Lysa awaken and claw at Sansa. Olenna looked up at her, securely fastening a shawl to Lysa’s head. She was mumbling in her half-asleep state. Nothing coherent, but Sansa couldn’t help but trying to read her lips. Would they speak a separate truth than the one they heard last night? A truth of Oh I was just joking! I didn’t coerce your mother to take me to see Winter, nor had I wanted to claw her throat for catching his eye.

Where was she, Sansa wondered. She didn’t let the worse thought – she’s dead – plague her mind. Her mother was alive. Her mother was alive. Alive.

Sansa felt the gentle embrace of the lie, and hugged it back.

“What is it?”

Sansa looked back down the cold halls of the Eyrie. She had awoken in the middle of the night and – after twenty or thirty minutes of tossing and turning, forcing her mind to fall back to sleep and miserably failing – she wandered the halls. They were quiet and cold at night as they had been during the day. Sansa wrapped furs around her as she wandered in the darkness. Moonlight bounced off the white stone, casting the godswood in an eerie, ethereal glow. She thought she saw a man standing in the center, beside the lump of a statue – a man without form, without shape, and around
whom snowflakes and dried leaves whirled around. A blink, and he was gone.

He doesn’t know I’m here. It was an eerily comforting thought. The reason she was awake, shivering in the Eyrie’s halls. Winter was looking for her, was doing anything and everything to find her and make her his.

She hated him. Hated the things he did to prove his supposed love; hated more the people who were flippantly tossed aside or slaughtered for the sake of love. Hated him, hated it. But his affection, his devotion...

Sansa tore her eyes from the godswood.

She found him eventually, tucked inside a massive bed. He looked a lot like the boy she tried to save. Jon. Lips purplish-blue, eyelids frozen shut. His skin was as cold as the stones, colder even. Had Sansa stayed in the doorway, she might have thought the boy asleep. Had Sansa not lit a candle (there were several on the table beside the bed, along with a wood-carved knight, a book of childish poems, and a plate with stale bread and molded cheese), she might have thought all was well.

Had it not been for the cold, perhaps her cousin would have survived.

Just like everyone and everything else.

Sansa smoothed the boy’s hair. Strands of it fell away, tangled in her fingers. Olenna had said that the boy had passed already, but gods if Sansa didn’t understand when. A year, at least. Maybe two. She looked at the plate of food, the toy – a year or two of Lysa lying to herself. That her son was alive, only sleeping.

One lie in a sea of hundreds. Thousands.

Sansa blinked, finding herself standing in the courtyard of the Eyrie with a witch and an unconscious aunt beside her. She flexed her fingers, willing away the feel of death from her fingertips.

What is it, the witch had asked. She looked back at Olenna. At the small twitch of Lysa’s bound hands (she was still asleep). “Her...son.” My cousin, gods. Sansa never met the child, not as a child fully formed. She tried to remember what Lysa planned to call her baby, one hand perched tenderly atop a round belly.

Lysa had been kind; or, something much kinder than what she showed Sansa in the godswood.

Lysa had loved. Her son, her sister. Though she had loved Winter to the point of obsession that she couldn’t love her family in truth. That false love brought about her sister’s missing and her own son’s death.

There was a sliver of fear on Olenna’s face (or something similar), but the older woman hid it just as quickly. She and Old Nan were alike in some regards. Though, a worrying thought wondered if it was a learned carelessness, schooling their emotions. She glanced down the hall, too, for a moment before returning Sansa’s gaze. “As much as it pains me to leave the boy, there’s nothing we can do for him. His body—” (Sansa schooled the shiver creeping up her spine. Gods, he was as old as Rickon, as small as him, and he was a body, not a boy). “—will be fine. There aren’t people or animals daring enough to climb up here.”

Still. It made Sansa uneasy leaving him here, all alone. Sansa only nodded.
The descent was short made long by the fear that Lysa was seconds away from plummeting to her death. The mix of herbs worked perfectly, though Olenna admitted she never much enjoyed sharing her stave with someone. Sansa flew just beside her, holding one of Lysa’s arm. She ignored how it twiched every now and then – a wild fear that Lysa was about to pounce again. *He was supposed to be mine! Lysa didn’t so much as mumble words. You deserve to die!*

When their feet touched the dirt in front of the Gates, Sansa let loose a long breath of relief. Olenna, too, though perhaps for a different reason.

Royce met them as they carefully untied Lysa. Asked with his eyes the same question Sansa had only an hour ago: *What of the boy?* Olenna merely shook her head. “I see…” he said,motioning for the knights with falcon helms to help carry the woman inside, ordering for her to be placed by the fire with furs piled atop. She sat motionless, haloed by oranges and reds.

As they broke their fast at the Gates, Sansa couldn’t help but wonder if Lysa would remember. If she would wake up, feel the weight of Sansa’s neck between her fingers and the scream of her own voice, and hate herself for what she’d done.

Maybe she did already. Why else would Lysa have locked herself up in the Eyrie despite being in the throngs of winter?

Sansa wasn’t sure if she hated or liked that found thread of similarity.

* * *

The smallfolk convened every other morning in the great hall of Highgarden. They spoke to the lord and lady of the castle, hoping to ease their ails with their farms and family and spats between one another. But more than that, they spoke to the witches, many of whom sat at a table near the high table (and many of whom were quietly gossiping. It took great skill to comprehend one conversation and giggle about another). So many of the smallfolk’s plights dealt with witchy things – crops that weren’t as bountiful as they used to be, livestock that sometimes got into their own spats with each other, and the uncertain whims of nature – that it the norm to have witches hear them out.

Sansa wasn’t so much in the mood for gossip the morning after they returned. She half-listened to the smallfolk, half-listened to the witches’ talk (so-and-so was supposedly courting a knight from Dorne, flying by moonlight to meet him in secret grottos).

She didn’t like how she found the smallfolk’s complaints so...ordinary. It was the same as every year, though much more bountiful than the farms and such up in the North, that was true. But there was a raging god, and endless snowstorm, and innocent lives drowned in the frozen lakes. Sansa hated that these thoughts of *I don’t care* swirled in her head.

A woman was addressing the court now, twisting her plain skirts in her fingers. “M’lord, m’lady, m’ladies.” She curtsied to them.

“Psst.” Sansa jumped in her seat, not expecting to see Margaery crouched behind her. She hadn’t seen when the other girl left her seat; though Sansa couldn’t pay attention to much of what was going on anyways. She looked over at the woman – the expression on her face was one wracked with worry, and fear. Knuckles were white where they disappeared in the tangle of brown fabric.

“Come.” Margaery offered her hand, and though Sansa felt guilty leaving the audience, she thought the fresh air would do her good.
Margaery led Sansa through the back door of the high hall, through corridors and past serving hands that knowingly moved out of the way as they trudged forward. The air was brisk, but warm. Sansa closed her eyes, letting the sun warm her skin, as she followed the witch through almost-familiar paths and gardens. On they went, winding left and right, into the heart of gardens encircling Highgarden. Sansa forgot how lovely they smelled, how beautiful the amalgamation of colors – every single possible color in the world, she thought, and some maybe she never dreamed of – stood in bright contrast to the clear blue sky, or the soft grey walls of the castle. Every day, Sansa forgot the beauty that lived here. So different from the harshness of the North or even the Vale.

So alive.

Sansa trailed her hands over flowers stretching their stems over the cobbled pathway. Their multicolored petals tickled the palm of her hand as she watched them sway back and forth from her interference. When she looked at her hand, a stray thorn left a red line across the flesh of her thumb.

“How was the visit?” Margaery began, stretching her arms up into the sky. “I can’t imagine flying with grandmother for that long without getting tired of her.”

Sansa let the smile pull at her lips. It felt nice; she forgot about that, too. “She wasn’t a bad flying companion. I’m sure even you would have managed the journey.”

“You don’t have to lie. She isn’t here.”

A laugh. And gods, Sansa felt it warm her up inside. “It was…” Not as expected, which was the first thought that pulled her tongue. Nor was it nice or lovely, simple platitudes that came easy and often. Sansa couldn’t imagine living in the Eyrie: with its tenuous relationship with winter, with having to descend each turn of season to live at the base. They were good people, yes, but living a life so unlike one Sansa preferred. As for Margaery’s question… “It was, well, both what I expected, and not.”

Margaery turned from twining roses together such that their stems twisted into a helix. At the base, petals of yellow and white laced between one another until it was impossible to tell where one rose started and another ended. “How do you mean? I thought you were merely paying a visit to your aunt. The unwell aunt, correct?”

Sansa worried her bottom lip. Stopped when she realized she was doing it. “Yes, but. But it is because she is unwell that the visit did not go as planned. She...she thought I was my mother. And lashed out at me.”

Her friend gasped. “How terrible!”

By instinct, Sansa reached for her neck. The bruising was gone, thanks to the poultice, but Sansa swore she could feel the ghost of her aunt’s fingers there. Wrapping, tighter and tighter and Sansa thought she was going to die.

She woke up last night gasping for air.

“But it was only because she was unwell,” Sansa said, shaking her head of the memory. She didn’t know why she was excusing her aunt’s behavior. Especially not after the truth of her mother. “Still, I… It proved to be a good visit.”

So Sansa recounted Lysa’s memory in brief, forgoing the truth of Winter and her lunacy. It was one thing to finally know what had happened to Catelyn Stark all those years ago. Except...she didn’t know everything. If her mother truly was alive or dead, or some horrid in-between. If Winter
had been the cause of it (of course he was. *He fell in love with my mother, and now me.* Sansa felt a pang of something twist in her chest).

Margaery had ran a finger up and down her created flower, brushing against the thorns. The cut on Sansa’s palm stung. “I’m so terribly sorry about your mother. I’m glad you have the truth of it, but...it’s awful, isn’t it?”

Sansa didn’t know what else to say, so she said nothing. Watched as Margaery began work on another twinned rose, this time an ivory white and a deep red. It looked so much like blood on snow that Sansa looked away, wandered around.

“Will you be staying in Highgarden for long?” Margaery said, breaking the silence between them. “I *do* ever miss your company in the winter season. As much as the other girls are fun – did you hear of Lottie’s lover in Starfall? Oh I bet she’s lying – I do ever miss your company.”

*Would you miss my company if you knew what I wrought unto the North?*

Sansa shook the thought away, faked it as a shiver of midmorning chill working its way between her cloak. It wasn’t cold, in truth. Sansa wondered if it ever got truly cold in Highgarden – or, what hell snow would bring to people only ever used to a light brisk wind. But Sansa *was* cold. Something so deep she wondered if her own bones were frozen, if there was slush filling her veins and not blood. Sansa sat on a bench and tried her skill at working with the roses, trying to burst forth something as fanciful as the creation Margaery was fine-tuning. The witch (satisfied with her own) came to sit thigh-by-thigh with Sansa. Her warmth was welcome and soothing.

She watched Sansa will the flowers into shape. One bud had petals the same coppery of her hair, and the other was a barely-pink. They danced around each other, but weren’t willing to embrace like the sorts Margaery made. Sansa sighed in frustration. The pink rose (in retaliation) drooped away. But from the center of the copper rose sprang forth a small, deep red fruit, hardly the size of an olive. An apple, Sansa thought, her lips pursed.

Margaery’s light laughter filled the garden. “Oh, Sansa, how clever! Even *I* wouldn’t have thought of that.”

It was meant as a compliment, surely, but Sansa couldn’t take it as such.

“Is this where you two have run off to?”

They jumped in unison, nearly toppling each other. Margaery linked her arm in Sansa’s – in solidarity. “We were only taking a break. It was getting rather stuffy in the hall.”

Olenna dismissed the blatant lie, not in the mood for bandying words this morning. There was a heaviness to the old witch’s movements, Sansa saw. And a darkness beneath eyes. “Go attend to the smallfolk. It’s a long and cold winter, after all.”

Sansa shivered.

“Will Sansa be staying here long, grandmother?”

Olenna’s gaze flitted towards Sansa, but she gave no physical worry about what they had seen – or what Sansa’s dreams were filled of. Though, they weren’t dreams, were they? Not with the missive Old Nan received (likely from Sansa’s father? Sansa couldn’t help but wonder on the ship, on the glacier in the shape of her. Was it still sailing the seas, or had it crash and splintered like the boat. Like the hundreds of people drowned). “For a while. No more than two weeks. The North will be missing her, even now.”
The vision of Winterfell drowned beneath snow filled Sansa mind. The very peak of the Great Keep poked out form the field of white. Everything was still. Everything was dead. And standing, staring at it all, a ghostly thing in the shape of a man.

Sansa clenched her fist, dug her teeth into the meat of her lower lip. She hated this, too. Hated that she was stuck here, hiding from Winter whilst her home, her family, was braving the storm she had wrought.

But what else was there to do? If she flew back North in the dead of night…

Olenna looked at her as if she could read her mind. Don’t do it, the old woman was saying.

Only, what was the alternative?

“Come,” Sansa said, more sharply than she planned, offering her free hand to Margaery. She took it, and Sansa led them out of the rose gardens and down the spiraling stairs and walkways back into the castle, where they shucked on cloaks and scarves and their staves. The sun was bright, the sky clear. It was cold, yes, but mercifully there wasn’t snow. Still, Sansa shivered. “We’ve work to do.”

* * *

So they worked. Tirelessly, and often through the nights.

Margaery was a wonderful companion to work with, given that both of them were best at willing flowers and crops to yield. Sansa only felt a little bit guilty about Jeyne, who was still in the North (gods, I never gave her a proper goodbye). Though she loved her friend dearly, Sansa couldn’t stomach the weight of working with animals, or with people.

Especially now.

The families she visited had children, varying from newborn babes to boys and girls as old as Sansa. And in each she saw little Jon, she saw her cousin. She saw all of the unnamed and faceless people screaming for help in a ship. Even Sofie, terrified and with chattering teeth as Winter demanded the song.

Crops were a tricky thing on their own. But at the least Sansa didn’t have to see the color in their skin fade or feel their heartbeat thump for the last time.

And at the least, their days were filled with the endless gossip. Sansa focused on the sound of Margaery’s voice, light and sweet, rather than the darkness that danced in her head.

Sansa couldn’t deny either the fact that she pushed herself in her Southron sentence. Her days and evenings (and some nights) were filled with aiding the endless smallfolk, and her nights were spent awake with burning eyes. She walked the gardens and concocted potions and read up on the endless tomes in Highgarden’s library (much cleaner and well-stocked than the one in the North. Though despite its vastness, Sansa couldn’t help but miss Winterfell’s own library. Though she knew it wasn’t the library she missed. It was Winterfell. It was home).

The librarians working the night shifts grew to know Sansa by the weight of her feet on the steps, calling out “Goodnight, m’lady, are there any books or scrolls you would like assistance in finding,” long before Sansa ever entered the library proper. She would smile at them and ask about their days and say (ever so politely) “No, thank you,” before getting lost in the endless rows of shelves.
There was a desk on the south wall, second floor, with a window that overlooked the gardens. And above that, the moon and stars and a cloudless sky. She took comfort in the fact that Jeyne and her family and all the smallfolk in the North were looking up at the same moon.

Jeyne wrote to her twice, though her words were simple and filled with longing for her friend. *I hope you’ll be back soon, and before the season changes back!* There had been (eventually) a scroll from her father, though sent to Olenna via Old Nan. Concerned about his daughter being away for so long. But even in his neat handwriting, Sansa read the *relief* that she was still in the South. How much truth did Eddard know about his wife’s disappearance? Sansa wondered on that often. Enough, to warrant fear every time he looked at Sansa. Because (and she knew this to be true) he saw Catelyn there. Missed her, and couldn’t bear to miss his daughter, too.

Was that why Old Nan didn’t tell her father about the dance?

She penned scrolls, crumpled them, penned new ones. Then crumpled those, too. There was too much to say – too much *guilt* to be rid of. Only, there were too few words that did justice to this sinking, frozen feeling inside her. The scroll she did write was as empty as she felt.

Most of the time, she read. About the various herbs not native to either the North or the Reach that doubled as poultices for wounds and remedies for aches. She traced over the illustrations of flowers that even Highgarden didn’t have in its infinite gardens.

When her eyes burned, lids heavy with longing to close, Sansa forced herself to walk the perimeter of the library.

And then, when the flickering of the candles was overtaken by the sunlight filtering in through the narrow windows, Sansa would leave, and do it all again the next day.

Olenna was right about the *few weeks*. It was nearing the end of the second now, and they were fully entrenched in winter’s clutches.

She couldn’t deny the *base fear* each time she stepped outside in the morning, expecting to see the gardens covered in snow. Or worse: Winter himself. Staring at her, *smiling* at her, as he offered his hand to take.

The bond – as Old Nan had put it – *was* weaker here in the Reach, and without her pin. Sansa hadn’t seen the god, nor had she heard stories of ice bears or horrid creatures from the smallfolk. There was frost on the ground, and a crispness as she took in air, but nothing more than that.

But it wasn’t gone. Some days, when Sansa couldn’t fight the lulling pull of sleep, her head dipping closer and closer to the pages of the book, sleep grabbed hold of her.

She saw Winter.

He was still the assumption of a person. And he was still looking for her. She found herself in Winterfell’s godswood mostly, the lake frozen and snow littering the ground more than the weirwood leaves. There were so many roses surrounding the massive tree, twisting and curling up towards the sky. Then Sansa would see Winter look elsewhere: the bright-orange glow of a blacksmith’s shop peeking out through the snow; the hollow halls of a building half-built, without a roof and with stones painted; a lake, unfrozen and with swaying grasses poking out from snow, people with heavy washbuckets lining the edge. They weren’t places Sansa thought she had been, nor Catelyn Stark. So Sansa thought (hoped) it *was* a dream this time.

Sometimes – when she was particularly tired – Sansa saw him standing between the shelves
Sansa snuck into the seedier streets of Highgarden the second night after they had gotten back from visiting Lysa. It was also the first thing she looked for in the endless shelves of the library: locally named *the stranger’s eye*, a red-shelled plant with a white and black core that unnervingly looked like an eye. The pile of them in the stall looked like a million shapeless things staring at her, watching her.

It couldn’t look at her as she ground it into powder and mixed it along with sugar into her teas. She didn’t want to sleep. Couldn’t, no matter how hard she tried.

It was better this way, Sansa told herself as she carefully mashed the stranger’s eyes into a fine powder. The quiet thumping of the mortar in the pestle, the little *screeee* it made, was her only companion in the darkness.

It was the waiting that killed her. Old Nan said she would get back to them when she and Olenna and the few other witches who survived the Dragons’ wrath fumbled for any possible solution. Only, there hadn’t been one.

*You’ve danced yourself into it*, she heard Old Nan’s raspy voice. *I can’t seem to work out a way for you to get out except to go through*.

What about her mother? Did Catelyn Stark finish the dance? Or did she succumb to its pull? Sansa wasn’t sure which truth was better.

And through all of that, Sansa worked, and worked, and worked. She would blink, find herself in the dirt fields of one farmer, who was asking for spells to keep frost at bay whilst he waited for the season to begin turning towards spring. Another blink, and Sansa was keeping watch of another witch (there were so many in the South, Sansa often lost track of who was who), as she eased a woman’s pain, a belly so full with child it looked painful. Another blink: Sansa was dining in Highgarden (though more often than not, pushing the food around with fork until she waited an acceptable amount of time. Sansa wasn’t hungry. She was cold, and tired, and terrified). Another blink: the rafters of her bedroom crowned in pale blue moonlight. Another: the halls of the library. Another: the endless grass hills and fields swaying beneath her as she flew high above them all.

At one point, Sansa paused in the air, her feet dangling beneath her. She looked south, at the Dornish peninsula whose brown mountains looked golden in the setting sun. Maybe if she ran farther away, Winter wouldn’t find her. To Dorne, even across the Narrow Sea. Even – she turned on her stave – the west, to the unknown lands far beyond the line of water at the horizon.

Sansa thought about it, often. Packing a bag and leaving Highgarden for the rest of the winter season. He found his way easily into her dreams in Winterfell, and in the Vale.

But what about Dorne? What about the lands she only ever read about in books, tracing their names over maps?

Only – flying away wouldn’t save Westeros, or Winterfell. Her friends and family and the countless strangers she met in passing or through witchery work.

It was the easier of the choices.

Sansa turned again, and flew back towards Highgarden.

* * *
Sansa couldn’t stop staring outside. At the gardens that sat beneath the window, the gardens far beyond in the distance, even the tops of trees and mountains poking up above the castle’s outer walls. It was the last day of the second week now, Sansa knowing she would need to return to Winterfell tomorrow (if only because she missed home, and family, and they missed her too. She hadn’t told Olenna exactly. That was a conversation she had been dreading for a long, long while). And those two weeks felt endlessly long and blink-of-an-eye short.

She watched it from the window of her bedroom. Blinked, shutting her eyes so tightly she saw wispy lights form unintelligible shapes. So tightly she had to blink focus back into her gaze.

Snow.

Here.

Her heart hurt, it was hammering so fast between her ribs.

*He's found me.*

Sansa shook the thought away. No. No, if Winter had found her, then he would be here right now, staring at her with that crooked smile just outside her window. Or: there would be ice roses intertwined with the ones made of thorns and petals. The flower beds beneath her window were mercifully free of ice.

No. He hadn't found her yet. This was merely the power – the obsession – of an old god.

An echo of his voice knocked against the walls of her mind, as wild as her heart and the thrum of blood: *I will make her love me*.

She took in huge lungfuls of the chilled air, hoping to rid herself of that voice. Sansa couldn't stop staring at the lazy specks of white floating down. It was hardly snow, but enough. Enough.

“I need to go find Olenna,” she said to the air.

Bundled up beneath cloak and scarf, Sansa rushed through the halls. Serving hands and witches and smallfolk were entranced by the floating white. There were gasps of glee and gasps of fear, fumbling fingers and swears. It never snowed this far beneath the Neck, someone said. It never snowed in Highgarden.

Sansa walked faster. Climbed the spiraling stair to Olenna’s rooms – she wasn’t there. Had she been out helping someone? Sansa couldn’t remember. All she could remember was it hadn’t been snowing the last time she walked through the winding paths outside, and now it was.

Snow. Good gods, it was *snowing*.

She nearly tripped over her feet as she pushed through a crowd piled around one of the doors. They looked as afraid as Sansa felt. Not really parsing that someone was trying to wriggle through them to get outside.

Sansa followed the covered walkway between two of the keeps, turning left instead of going inside. Following it until it ended at the gates of the gardens. A part of her that still retained sanity (she thought that’s what it was) laughed at the sight of the gardens. First the godswood, and now this…

A fleeting memory of Rickon catching snowflakes in Winterfell. How he looked so pleased with himself having caught them in his gloves. How he – and the rest of her family – had been so
innocent to what this winter season would bring. It hurt remembering her brother’s glee.

With shaking fingers (from lack of sleep, she told herself, from the heightened pulse of the stranger’s eyes in her tea), Sansa reached out. Caught a fleeting handful on her bare skin.

They burned.

Sansa dropped them (though they must have melted), clutching her hand tightly as though she touched hot coals. It felt like that. Like her hand was sloughing off from her body.

It didn’t. And when she peeled open her fingers, there was nothing but the crescents of her fingernails marring skin.

It was just her imagination. Right? Just her imagination that the soft breeze blew harder. Just her imagination that something was pulling her, lulling her, into the snowflakes. And it was just her imagination that was clawing her heart, her lungs. Sansa couldn’t breath.

*Clack clack clack*

She spun around.

No.

Only, he wasn’t here. It was Olenna, her rose stave clacking on the stones as she rushed towards her, out of breath. “There you are,” the old witch said, pushing the words out. Breathing in a long breath, gnarled fingers clutching tightly to her stave.

“He’s…” *found me*. The words caught in Sansa’s throat.

Olenna took in one more lungful of air. “I don’t think so, child. You know the sort of things it does. This is…” She waved a hand in the air, trying to find the words – or the lie – to explain the snow. Except, there wasn’t one.

Sansa opened her mouth, a strangled cry erupting from her. *No*. She was supposed to be *safe* in Highgarden, in the South. Winter wasn’t supposed to find her.

Winter wasn’t supposed to love her.

She found her voice: “He’s found me. He’s brought the snows with him. He’s…” Her voice faltered then, unable to speak the fear that sat in her chest. The *truth*.

Sansa clutched her head and cried.

“It hasn’t found you *yet*, child.” Olenna was trying her best to assuage Sansa, but it was pointless. The gnawing thoughts overtook her; it was almost impossible to hear the rest of Olenna’s empty assurances.

It was almost impossible to hear the first scream.

Through tear-clouded eyes, Sansa saw it. *Saw them*.

Climbing up and over the further walls of Highgarden, smashing through the gates and the crenels. Things spawned from the darkest recesses of human imagination. A bear wrought in ice was too kind an explanation. Monstrosities, and half-eaten men made wreathed in ice, and screams.

Snowflakes began falling harder around them as those things clawed up and over and inside
the castle.

He was too tired of waiting. Winter had come for Sansa.
the god

Chapter Notes

[ Thank all of you guys so so much for your constant love for this story!! I absolutely love writing this too, and seeing your guys’ reactions are always the best :D

Bit of something a little different this chapter, but I still really hope you like it! ]

“What...what are you?”

Her voice cut through the silence. The dead human was of no more interest, nor the wandering creatures that he had let roam free this season. All that existed was the ringing of her words. Winter turned, stared at her, stunned. Never had she ventured this far north to his domain. She was practically at his doorstep, the ruined human tower standing over them in the distance. She was practically knocking, asking for entrance into his kingdom of ice and snow.

Slowly, Winter stood, approaching her, step by step. There were other sounds – frantic scrambling and angry hisses and maybe crying? None of that mattered; those things were nothing. Nothing but Summer, but his other half! Here, in the north, finally having realized where she truly belonged. With him. In those long seconds as he approached, Winter marveled at the way the setting sunlight caught Summer’s rich red hair, casting it in fiery oranges and reds and golds, strands of it peeking out from human clothing. He always loved that – loved the colors, the vibrancy of them, the way they sat in stark contrast to his world of snow and ice. Winter brought death, brought the end of all things. Nothing had the sheer power to stop him, aside from this lovely creature, whose body emanated every color of the world, and whose mere touch revived the flowers he buried beneath snow, or sent the rivers running their courses again.

Only, Summer just stood there, watching him, sunlight in her hair and fear shaking her fists. Don’t be afraid, he wanted to tell her. I’m here to take you back.

“What am I to you?” Her voice was small, but sweet, so sweet, like birdsongs or the sway of flowers in meadows.

Winter was hardly a step away, and he felt something pull where he imagined a heart might be. Humans needed them for life, knew full well how easy it was to kill humans. They were a nuisance, really. There were unnecessary.

His Summer had a heart, though. Winter could feel it pulsating against the tendrils of wind he wrapped around her. It was a beacon, a drumming beat urging him forward with each step. Telling Winter: Here I am, here I am, come take me home.

Closing that gap between them, raising his hands towards her, Winter willed the wind to speak the one thing he hoped – he knew – would remind Summer who she was to him.

Mine.

He touched her – how he’d longed to touch her again! – her skin so warm beneath his, so
soft. Her heart was hammering beneath his touch.

Winter watched her lips as a scream erupted from them. Even strangled, she sounded beautiful.

He marveled at her, from the first time he saw her in the dance. Curious why Summer took this form, and not another that was more fitting for the goddess of the sun, of rolling meadows heavy with golden wheat, of human laughter as they ran through flowers. His Summer was still the most beautiful, regardless what shape she took. And perhaps that was it... Forming his body into the simple shape of a human: only two arms, two legs, and the frivolous mimicry of a heart. Slowly, he opened his mouth, testing it. It felt so confined speaking from it, but he did.

“Mine,” Winter repeated, using shapes and sounds he’d heard in the centuries since humans began naming the mountains, the forests. It was such a small sound, compared to the gales he would send billowing for her.

Summer startled, staring up at him with a crease maring her brow. Her eyes in this form were blue, as boundless as the seas surrounding the land, or a cloudless sky with no end in sight.

Winter let his icy fingers trail down her cheek. From it, he saw an angry red silhouette of his hand against her skin. He smiled at that. Lower his fingers moved, across her jaw, her neck. One hand traveling as far as her arm, wrapping around it, letting wisps of himself snake up through the clothing, wrapping around and around her. Not at all wanting to let her go. Not at all willing to, either. “You must be her.”

“I…” Summer began. She shivered beneath his touch.

He continued, squeezing her tighter, hoping it was joyous rapture that kept her from remembering. “You were in the dance.” Winter felt her arm pull away, but he couldn't let her leave. Not again. She was here, she was his. He leant in, tasting the warmth emanating off her skin. Listening to the flurry of her heart where he touched her. It beat so fast, faster now that he was wrapped around her. “And now, here you are. In my winter. My lovely Summer.”

Why won’t she remember?

Winter felt something inside his false human body grow hot, hotter. The snowflakes that tumbled around them moved quicker, cutting into Summer’s clothing with pinpricks of ice. Her skirts danced angrily around her legs. On and on, her heart beat faster.

“Please,” she began, and the winds slowed. Snowflakes caught in her hair, along with the rays of dusk that haloed her in gold. It was her voice, her voice alone that made the heat inside of Winter’s form ebb, if only a fraction. And her voice, oh so sweet. Winter longed to listen to it for eternity. “Please stop the storm.”

He tilted his head, not releasing his gaze or grip on her. Something urged his human lips to curve upward. Happiness? No, there was something else that humans smiled because. Winter wondered what it was as he answered her, “But why? This is for you.”

To emphasize his love of her, Winter swirled the snowflakes around them in a cocoon of ice. As they whipped around, spinning and turning, glittering sunset caught on them, splaying Summer in sparks of fading gold. Like she was shining, glistening. As beautiful as she always was.

“Because I… I don’t want them. I never meant to dance. To dance with you. I– I never meant to–”
Winter wasn’t sure what Summer was saying. “Meant?” Meant what? There was no meaning to them – there was the dance, the changing of who reigned over the world, and there was this damning ache inside him every time he saw Summer. Once, he held onto her, like he was now. But that lovely visage of her disappeared in a blink, before his reign ended. Winter sometimes wondered if, like humans, he had dreamt of her.

Dances passed, and each time Winter tried to pull Summer free. Her hands were so warm as they twirled and spun, the beat of humans’ movements and their instruments fading away as Winter lost himself in the motions. Their hands interlocked, and Winter tugged. They spun around, leaping around humans oblivious to the truth around them as they clapped and sang and danced to their own tune. Winter cared not a single snowflake about them.

And one time, like a human dream, she was there. Standing on the edge of the clearing, candlelight casting her in harsh shadows. Staring at him.

Winter stepped out of the dance. Reached for her. Someone else was there; Winter tore winds at them, willing the mimic to leave him and his Summer in peace.

Only, a blink ago, she was there. Resplendent in the darkness, flames crowning her head. His arms wrapping around her, pulling her in to the darkness of the forest, snowflakes beginning to swirl around them. And a blink, she was gone. Winter ravaged the lands in storms, looking for her, desperate to have her. To hold her. To taste her.

But she was gone. Just like that.

Winter had to have her. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing her again.

He felt his fingers wrapped tighter. Stared at his Summer, wondering why she wouldn’t accept him now, when she had been thrilled at the sight of his gifts: the world blanketed in snow, each of them carved in her wondrous likeness; the roses wrought in ice, wrapped around her feet; the pin that she wore, to the first dance and the second, and even now. He brought it back to her beneath a blood-red tree. Winter’s voice was loud when he said, “We don’t mean anything, my sweet. We are. We are everything, and you are mine.”

Summer’s heart was beating faster, faster. He felt her pull against his grip, but Winter only held on tighter. She said, in a voice that was small and fraught with worry, “Please. Let me go, please. I’m not her. I’m–”

Something hit him.

Winter felt hot, saw the snowflakes fluttering around them melt, pooling where they stood. He whipped around, seeing pesky humans who thought they were better than a god. Fools! How foolish humans were, to think they were capable of anything important. Winter willed snow and ice from the ground, shooting it at the flying human, knocking it back with a resounding thud.

“No!” his Summer screamed.

Winter turned on Summer then, grabbing hold of her. His voice came out more frantic than he even thought was possible. It was this false human body, he knew. This frail human heart, beating as hard as hers. “Come, my sweet! My Summer!”

Snows whirled around them, catching the fading sunlight in a whirlwind of reds and oranges and yellows, the same colors that danced in Summer’s hair. Like she and it were part of a raging fire, caught in the heart of it. The trees flickered in and out of existence. The snows, too, and those
wretched little humans who were continuing to pelt him with fire. Winter sent winds and snow swirling faster around them, shielding them from everything else but this: but the two of them, Winter and Summer, together.

Summer was still trying to pull free, still crying out for someone or something. Wetness trickled from her eyes.

Still, Winter did not let go.

Not until something exploded on him. *Inside* him.

Winter felt himself being wrenched apart in every single direction, a million hands clawing for him, tearing him this way and that. He felt his grip on her slip away, unable to hold on to anything but his own self.

He screamed as he watched his Summer – his lovely Summer, with sunlight in her hair and lines of tears falling from her eyes – disappear in a final blinding gust of darkness.

* * *

Winter stared up at the moon, the cloudless sky that it hung in. Stars splattered against the blackness above. There were trees – so many trees, always so many of them, most without leaves and all with branches heavy with snow and frost. Sometimes, there were so many trees stretching far into the distance, that Winter might have thought the world to be a sea of them beneath glittering stars above. Except, Winter knew of the world beneath his domain. Knew of the mountains that stretched along the coast, of the forests with trees reaching up into the sky and free of the burden of his winter. Of lakes and rivers, winding and weaving through grasses and rocks and flowers, not stopping until it reached the world at the far south.

Here, everything was blanketed in snow. The sea of trees, the ground, all of it unmarred by animals or wind. Specks flew past him, weaving through the trees as he took slow steps through his kingdom. His feet didn’t leave marks in the pure whiteness beneath him.

When he turned at the howl of a creature, Winter froze.

A scar of red in the sea of white and blue and grey. She was staring at the towering wall of ice – the one thing that separated him from the humans – glittering in the moonlight. Like a vertical sea of stars marking the end of the boundless sea of trees. The girl stretched a hand towards it, towards the sky, as if wondering if there was even an end to that.

Winter stared at her. She had been here before, had *felt* her presence. Just like now: staring at the Wall, at the sea of trees she was floating in. It was just like last time, just before Summer wrenched free of his grasp and he exploded into a thousand million snowflakes. He *felt* heaviness in her heart, then, like an unknown spectre had her in its grasp.

And now, there was a heaviness that even Winter wasn’t sure he could ease.

Winter strode towards her, one step, two. Willed the wind to call out for her, to bring her to him.

A blink, and she was gone.

* * *

Summer had always been an echoing beat where his human heart might have been. A soft
thrumming, as if it was her own heart he felt in moments when nothing existed in the world save for his neverending snows and the quiet murmur of winds threading through tree branches. It comforted him, knowing that Summer was always there, somewhere beneath his kingdom. She wasn’t prone to running away now, not after their second dance. She had secretly loved his gifts, he knew.

And Winter had been planning his next act before he saw her, so close to that border where he reigned. Cheeks flushed from ice and sunlight in her hair. Winter couldn’t help himself, then. He had to have her.

But the day after he touched her, nearly pulled her back to his domain, she had disappeared.

Winter tore through the northern human lands, covering everything in ice and shadows, screaming through his winds: Where is she?

The humans cowered inside their wood and stone homes. The snows were piled high, some higher than the meek little things they called a house. Against the castle where his Summer took shelter, though, humans dressed in thick leather and metal cleared it away for animals and other humans to traverse through. Still, unless needed, they didn’t dare venture to go outside. Not where Winter howled through the days and nights. Not when Winter stole every living creature that dared to step into his snows, demanding them to reveal where Summer had gone. And claiming them for his legion when they all answered the same. So pathetic.

Where is she.

Winter tore his latest gift through a starless night, snows falling heavy against frozen waters. He felt that raging heat inside him, and Winter didn’t know how to quench it. Summer had disappeared, the boundless colors of her lost. He thought he had found her, hiding in the far reaches of his domain, off an island filled with horrid creatures that might once have been human. They turned on him when he stood in his shifting human shape. Their hearts exploded in shards of ice.

He thought he heard her voice, so small against the roar of waves and a cacophony of human screams: Please! What do you want?

Winter yelled into the darkness, crashing his gift into the human vessel. Hoping for that thunderous ache inside him to ease as he watched humans flail – for a moment – in the icy waters, flotsam rolling beneath and over the surface. For a moment, he wondered if he saw that lovely scar of red against the darkness. But he didn’t.

What do you want, the ghost of her said.

“You.”

Summer hadn’t been there, or on that wretched island, or in her stone castle.

Winter retraced her path, though sometimes it was difficult to remember where he had seen her. There was the clearing where she danced so prettily for him, her sunset hair twirling around pale skin and catching the faint lamplight. There was a knoll where Winter watched her watch the sun rise above the eastern hills. The fork in the massive river forking northward, where she stood in the center and skipped stones. Beneath the massive tree with bone-white branches.

Through it, Winter felt another tug, as if Summer was trying to call for him. To pull him to her. He tore through the lands, desperate, looking for where she might be. Only, there was silence when he called for her.

Then, he stood in the center of a small homestead. Winter looked at the unlit torches standing
watch outside the largest, the crops swaying behind it burdened with snow. There was the assumed
shape of a snowman, its smile crooked and body fat. If this was meant to be him, the humans were
misguided thinking they could capture the likeness of a god. He punched a fist made of wind and ice
through it and ripped the head off.

Whereeeeeee, he cried out. Creatures whined behind him. Winter stared at them, losing
interest at the flickering light spilling from the largest building. He remembered something. A story
that his Summer heard only part of, a story that he might have heard in full had the musing of
humans interested before. It hadn’t. But now…

He approached the building, staring at the small humans wrapped in blankets inside. The fire
was paltry. The humans shivered, huddled beside one another, singing a song muffled through the
window. As if to mock him, Winter swore he heard the faint whisper of his Summer: don’t kill them,
please.

Winter knocked at the window with thin fingers of ice. The children looked up at him. With
hesitation, the smaller human walked towards the door, opening it a crack. The other human hissed
to close it. “H-Hello?” the child whispered.

“What are you singing?” Winter asked them, remembering the way humans talked. His
Summer responded to it much kinder than whispers brought on winds.

He saw the bigger human shield the other with an arm. As if that would do anything. Winter
needed only think of winds tearing down from the mountains beyond, ripping the crops from their
soil, the building from the ground, the cowering animals into the sharpened remains of the
foundations – and it would all come true. An arm to protect was nothing against a god.

“One of them hissed to go back inside. That human was wise enough to be afraid. Winter
vaguely remembered there being a third child, one that his Summer tried so desperately to save.
Winter could have saved it, might have, if it hadn’t been so far gone. There was nothing left for that
boy save a quick, painless death – a mercy Winter bestowed.

Winter looked away from the older human towards the smaller. This one was too young to be
afraid of a god. Even when the god took their eldest sibling. Oh, what a fool. “Little one, what is that
song.” He would have it out of the child, one way or another. If it weren’t for the fading words of his
Summer – don’t kill them – perhaps he would have forced the tune from him. Except, Summer had
been so displeased with his other gift as it crashed into the ship. A pity.

A dog appeared, old with matted fur, barking at Winter. The other child grabbed hold of it
before Winter had the common decency to send the thing to a kind death, too. “It’s n-nothing. Just a
song,” the new-eldest said, just as the younger one replied, “‘How to Make a Man.’ A traveller
taught us last summer.”

Winter snapped his attention to the small child. How to make a man… Was that why Summer
didn’t love him? Because she had found a human vessel, a form that was preferable to her beauty,
and yet Winter was still shapeless and boundless? Would Summer love him, fully, if he were to
become like her?

“A man?” he answered, bending down to look the youngest human in the eye. The dog
barked again. “Tell me, children, how do you make a man?”
They sang the song, though Winter did not fail to notice their hesitation.

It seemed easy enough. Simple things humans use: iron and lime and water, sulfur and potash and gold, silver and lead and phosphor. It seemed too easy to become a man, Winter laughed, winds slamming against the building until the very boards creaked. The children cringed beneath him, wrapping that measly blanket tighter.

He needed to know, though. He needed to ensure that the song was the truth, and not a lie said by these small, insignificant humans to wish Winter away. It wouldn’t be the first time humans lied to him. It wouldn’t be the first time Winter willed humans into an insignificant nonexistence.

Winter grabbed tightly of the older child, hearing her scream as his icy fingers dug into her thin clothing. Winter felt her heart beating painfully fast: fear, and uncertainty, and more fear. “Tell me, little one. If I become a man, will my Summer love me?”

The child tried to wriggle free, but that only made Winter grip tighter. No, he tried to tell the human. You cannot leave until you answer me. As if understanding his motive, the human muttered, “I don’t...know…”

That flurry of heat tore through his chest at her admission. No! “But she must. She must!”

Still, the human tried to shake herself free. Winter’s fingers dug in deeper, so hard he couldn’t feel the heat of her body, and her heart was slowing. Or maybe his was just beating so fast, too fast, to not realize the normalcy of hers. Still, the human’s teeth chattered once, twice, when she answered, “Yes, yes! She’ll love you. She’ll never stop loving you.”

Winter let her go then, feeling something else slip from inside of him. But that didn’t matter.

Yes.

He howled into the air, letting the winds swirl around him and the building and the humans. That animal barked, and the humans squirmed beneath the cold. Winter didn’t hear the door slam, or the animals shaking in the building beside, in fear and knowing that there was something inhuman just outside.

Yes!

He shouted into the darkness, “I will make her love me.”

* * *

Humans named everything. The named the lands and the oceans and the valley and the mountains. They named the creatures that roamed wild plains and swam through warm waters and flew high above the clouds. They named the plants that sprouted on hillsides and weathered deserts and poked through frost. They named their villages, their castles, their lords. They named smaller things, too, like the iron and lime and gold that would make a man. Humans did it because they thought everything needed a reason, an explanation. Humans named their fears, too, and their hopes and their wishes.

And they named the gods.

Winter never remembered all of his names, or the stories the humans devised to explain him. As if there was meaning to his own existence! As if the world could explain the intricate balance between him and Summer, and all of the smaller gods that existed between them.
He just was. He willed the storms and snows and winds long before humans came to be, and would continue long after theywarred themselves into extinction.

Humans, meanwhile, did not notice the god as he slipped between the lands they named or the towns with crooked buildings or the rivers that flowed even in the midst of his season.

Winter followed the song, caught himself humming its lifeless tune the way those small humans had sang it for him. First was iron: Winter snuck past a sleeping dog into the bright-orange glow of fire of a blacksmith’s, watching as the man hammered a bit of metal straight, watching as the man did not notice a single nail missing from his stores. Next, lime: a village with a half-built building left unfinished, its walls buried in so much snow Winter might have missed it, and he did not miss the chilled sacks of pigment beside containers stained with color.

It was too easy. Winter was going to become a man soon, and Summer was going to love him. As a kindness, he left the humans alive as he stole the ingredients. Winter could hear his Summer’s plea – don’t kill them – and wondered if she would be happy to know he didn’t.

Often, Winter found himself standing in the wood at the center of the stone castle, blood-red leaves covered by fresh snow. The lake was frozen solid, and he often wondered if he could will Summer back. She had been just there, and she had been so surprised – excited! – when ice roses sprang from her feet.

He thought he had lost his Summer – gone, like before, never to be seen again, no matter how often Winter could see her, see the way the sunlight trickled off of her hair or her skin, or the way the clothing she wore brought out the life that she could will with her fingers. He thought he had lost his Summer, even as Winter scoured for the materials to make himself a man.

But there was a moment, brief, where that invisible thing inside him tugged him south, towards a valley filled with mountains and topped in ice. Winter rushed there, dropping the sulfur he had collected, not wanting to miss her. As if Summer was calling him back.

He stood in the central courtyard of a castle without a name, not remembering what humans once called it. Winter stood in the center, touching the dirtied snow. There should be a tree here, as bone-white as the one in his Summer’s castle, with leaves as red as her hair. But there wasn’t. And there wasn’t the beautiful creature of Summer.

Winter felt her, though. Could hear her echoing voice in the winds that howled against the white stones. Could smell her warmth. Could see her smiles, and feel her heart beating.

Summer had been here. And Winter was too late.

He wandered through the halls, hoping that his Summer might reappear at any second. Like she was waiting for him to find her again, giggling to herself in a hidden shadow. Perhaps she was there! behind a wall or column, watching him look for her. About to spring forth and wrap her lovely arms around him, content to be his forever.

Much of the castle was disused, cold. One room was littered with herbs – freshly ground and fresh burned. Amongst it all he wondered if it was the taste of Summer that had him lingering there, staring at nothing. Other smaller rooms had human beds unmade, or clothing sprawled on the floor as if humans had rushed out the moment they saw the first snowflakes. It wouldn’t be the first time humans fled at the mere sight of Winter’s power.

Another room, tucked away from others, was the only one occupied. A small human. It had been a long time since his eyes opened, since air passed through small lungs. Winter smelled fading
candle smoke. He trailed an icy finger down the child’s chest, wondering if Summer had done the same.

Winter was getting close, he knew. Summer had been here, in these mountains at the edge of his reach. The pull of her was unmistakable: even after days of silence, of hoping his efforts to become human weren’t in vain.

Summer had ran south. And so Winter would follow.

***

He slowly spread his reach further south, groping for a sign of her in the lands beneath the mountains. Winter thought himself a fool for only a second: of course if he had been unable to feel Summer in the lands she normally inhabited, then she was elsewhere. Winter found her silver pin on that wretched island, kept it tucked in these human clothes he was unaccustomed to. Felt it with human hands.

She was here, he thought. Winter sometimes felt her, like a fading beat of heart, though Summer never came to him like she used to. Standing at the foot of that endless wall blocking his kingdom from the rest; turning to watch as he approached, roses twining around her legs; staring as snowflakes swirled around and around them, her heart hammering so fast in the space between them. Even recently, when he slammed his gift into that ship, or when he learned the song – Summer had been there. But now! Now, Winter was starved of her. Aching to feel her lovely skin beneath his, the heat of her, the softness. To watch sunlight filter between strands of her hair. To bend in, and kiss her with human lips.

Slowly, Winter spread his reach further into lands unused to snows and ice. He listened to humans (though did not kill them! At least, not often). They did not fear him now that Winter looked like them. They did not cower, or cry, or scream. They moaned about his reach, complained of the beautiful frost that turned their flowers and crops into glistening icicles. The humans were selfish to not live in winter.

Slowly, Winter spread his reach further and further. Waiting for that beat, that pulse of her heart.

Upon each snowflake, Winter etched her face. Hoping his memory of her was as beautiful as the truth; though, he knew that was false. Nothing could compare to Summer. Every time he saw her, he forgot how lovely she was. How ethereal. A season made flesh.

And then, with the sun rising, he felt it.

That beat.

It sent a shiver through his human body. Turned the heart beating: thump, thump, thump.

Winter turned south, to the speck of the stone castle in the distance. It was wreathed in green, spots of color painting it inside and out.

There.

Winter smiled, willing the snows and winds to lunge towards that castle. To find her, wrap her up in his clutches, and hold her fast until he could see her again. Touch her again. Robe her in clothes of snow. An icy crown perched atop sunset curls.

She wasn't going to escape this time.
Winter strode through the fields of greens, watching them fade to yellow and brown beneath his footsteps. Behind him as he walked, a trail of frost followed. Ahead of him, inside of the stone walls whose tops were dusted in snow, screams.

He leaped to the top of a parapet, staring down at this slice of Summer’s kingdom. It was as beautiful as she was: boundless colors, stretching as far as the long shadows, illuminated in soft yellow sunrise. And there she was – a speck of brilliant dusk, encircled in fire – his queen. Winter felt it again, that tug deep inside his human chest, that pull towards her. And the tug on lips: a smile, one that only grew and grew as he watched her stave off his legion of ice and snow.

So beautiful. So radiant. Winter couldn’t look away, even as swarms of ice swallowed her flames. Even as she and her friends were pushed back into the gardens. Even as the screams all around him grew louder.

Summer had slipped away from him last time. But now… Winter wasn’t going to let her get away. Not now.

Not ever again.
the bargain

The screams echoed off the heavy stone walls of Highgarden.

The things weren't human. Monstrosities born from the darkest recesses of nightmares and shadows. From bedtime stories told to children to make them behave: massive beasts of ice with claws and jaws capable of swallowing humans whole; slender things without faces, limbs pointed to pierce through bone as easily as flesh; creatures with wings, or with too many legs, or too many hungry mouths. There had been stories, fables. Only, they were real. And horrid, and howling. Even the ones that were human were far from it: decapitated heads, gaping stomachs, missing limbs. Wounds cauterized with ice, and bodies moving without grace. With only determination: to attack, to maim, to kill. The tang of fresh blood mixed with the cloying sweetness of flowers filling the air.

Winter had come for Sansa with an army, with all the might of his kingdom of shadows and ice and death. And she thought – knew – that there was no way he was leaving without her.

“Go get the others!”

Sansa forced her gaze away, from the onslaught of terrible monsters, towards Olenna. The old witch clutched her stave in both hands, knuckles white. Flakes of snow caught on her shawl, in the wrinkles of her coat. Though she hid it well, the old woman was terrified. Her lies hung in the space between them.

Back to the walls. There were too many of them to count, climbing over and smashing through the gates. The knights fought back, but most ran away. Didn't matter; they all died the same.

No.

To the winding streets between the walls. Ramshackle houses against the stones, the canvas tents of stalls selling fish and vegetables and handcrafted knickknacks. All overturned as people scrambled towards safety, pushing others behind them in a desperate hope two seconds would save their lives. Children fell between legs, dogs and cats tripped people as they too knew standing ground was futile. The monsters didn't care who they were; they all died the same.

No.

Sansa knew she had done this. Knew that she had to stop it, somehow, someway. Still, no matter how hard Sansa willed her body to move, she couldn't. She thought she was frozen here, in the courtyard with a flurry of snow and wind around her. As if waiting for Winter to come and collect her.

A gnarled hand shoved Sansa. She tripped over her feet. The stone floor hurt, scraping her palms. Olenna’s voice was just as solid and sharp: “Move, child! Go get the rest of the girls!”

Sansa shook the shackles of fear from her, heavy as they were. Yes, yes, she had to do something. Everything. Winter wasn’t going to mercilessly slaughter everyone. Sansa wouldn’t let him.

No matter how much she was terrified.

One look back at Olenna: the witch was already flying away on her stave towards the thick of
the castle. Sansa thought of Old Nan, who barreled into Winter when he held her in his icy grasp. There was something to be said about the courage of the older witches. Something about the horrors they had lived through. Did those match up to this slaughter? To this ceaseless torment of the gods? Sansa wasn’t sure if she wanted to know.

She pushed her way through a scrambling crowd, their frenzied attention now focused on the monstrosities climbing the walls rather than the sudden storm of snow. Most were panicked, many were crying. Highgarden had seen neither monsters nor snow before, nothing worse than heavy rains. Sansa yelled at them to hide inside the safety of the castle, bar the doors. And, silently, to pray to the gods that they would make it through this. They listened and believed, because they wanted it to be true. That stone and wood and metal would protect them from this.

When they asked her if everything was going to be alright, she lied.

The witch’s quarters were a flurry already. The older girls were comforting the younger ones – some of whom were only nine or ten, an age Sansa never thought about until now, with their high-pitched wails and snotty nose. They cried about the snow and the cold and the ceaseless screaming. Sansa could hear it even here. Pictured the way the smallfolk ran away, tumbling over their own feet or the collapsed bodies of their fellow friends and neighbors. Some of them fought back. Some of them picked up those that had fallen. None of them (she feared, she knew) would make it.

One of the older girls – Alysanne – looked up at Sansa as she entered. The witch was a few years older than Sansa. She had her dark wood stave in one hand, and the other placed gently on a crying child’s shoulder.

Sansa managed not to think about how children as young as her brothers and sister – younger, even – were out there hiding beneath upturned stalls and in narrow alleys between buildings. She managed not to think about whether or not Winter had done the same to the North after she had ran away. To Alysanne, Sansa managed to say (with enough level to her voice), “Grandmother needs us.”

Someone shoved passed Sansa, worried whispers following her. Other witches had gone already, to find their friends and families. The rest looked at eachother, fumbling with their skirts and staves, as terrified as Sansa felt. Alysanne nodded, giving the smaller witch a warm hug. Over her shoulder, though, Alysanne’s face was filled with nothing warm. It was how Sansa felt, but worse. To the still-crying girl: “Stay here, all of you little ones. Lock the doors and windows. And don’t open it for anyone that isn’t me.”

She grabbed the front of Alysanne’s cloak as their hug ended. Unwilling to say goodbye, maybe for the last time. “Promise?”

Alysanne kissed the top of the girl’s bed-head curls. Was the witch imagining her own sisters, her cousins, all of the smallfolk she had helped make it through sweltering summers and harsh winters, in the red-eyed tears and quivering voice? Just like Sansa was, like all the other girls here. “I promise.”

Sansa didn’t see Margaery, and half hoped her friend was miles away helping some poor farmer with their crops.

Back outside, the snow was falling heavier. A thin layer of white covered the ground, the rooftops, the gardens off in the distance. If she squinted hard enough, Sansa could imagine it was Winterfell at the beginning of the season. Dusting of snow turning everything clean. Sansa tried not to imagine the horrors or the screams back home. Winterfell was so much smaller than Highgarden, far fewer people, but would it survive this onslaught of ice and monsters? It survived countless
winters, yes, but that was without a raging, relentless god.

She shook her head. Sent a prayer to the old gods and the new that her family and everyone back home was safe, snuggled beneath furs by a roaring fire. It was the best she could do to ease the ice clutching her heart.

They left in groups of two or three, knowing the strength in numbers. Sansa paired off with Alysanne. The youngest witches were advised to stay indoors, but a small handful came with them. Sansa wondered at their bravery. They had managed to stopper their tears and noses.

Before long, she and Alysanne were in the market quarter between the walls. The ivy climbing up the white stones was frosted over.

They rushed to each of the people lying in the streets; at least, the people with their limbs and heads attached, or without a heavy dusting of snow sticking to pools of blood. There were few, maybe three in the quarter, that they healed. An older man croaked to leave him, he didn’t want to be saved, not when his wife and children lay murdered on the other side of the street. Snowflakes clung to the trail of tears on his cheeks. Alysanne ignored him, telling him platitudes of It will be alright through clenched teeth. Eventually, Sansa felt the whisper to stop. So many of them were dead already...

A crash.

Higharden’s knights shielded against the heavy force of nightmares. There were three beasts, each taller and wider and stronger than any of the men. The knights’ swords clashed uselessly against the ice, frost limning the steel of their weapons and armor. One tripped in the snow, sword flying behind him. He shuffled away, but the beast was relentless. It was very loosely an ice bear, huge jagged icicles shooting from its back. It lumbered forward, playing with the knight as his back collided with a shattered cart, upended boxes spilling grain. His prayer was mumbled through tears.

One of the boxes shot forward and smacked the ice bear in its open maw. It shuddered at the impact, grain dusting its dirtied icy fur. Its claws left deep indents in the weathered stone floor. Its roar thundered.

Alysanne raised whatever else was around – boxes, stools, cartwheels, anything – as Sansa set them ablaze. They smashed fiery debris at the monster, distracting it from the knight. It howled in pain and anger, one leg sloughing thin beneath the fire. Half of its face melted off. But it didn’t relent, barreling towards the witches with its full force and an open maw.

“How does it die?” Alysanne shouted, leaping left as Sansa leapt right. The ice bear’s remaining front leg narrowly missed the girl. It skidding to a stop, failing before colliding into the wall behind. The wall shuddered, iron sconces bent. But the ice bear looked unfazed.

Behind them, the other knights were losing ground. They were better matched now with one less monstrosity, but Sansa knew they wouldn’t last long. Not as their swords bounced off harmlessly. Not as one of the creatures reared back and swiped at the middle knight with jagged ice claws.

Sansa scrambled to her feet. She was standing between the injured (and angry) monster, and the ones behind her. “With fire.”

She set the knights’ swords alight.

It didn’t stop the monsters’ claws from shredding through one of the men’s gorgets, crimson
spilling onto the stone. But it did give the men a chance. The creatures were unfazed by the sight of fire, not like animals that shy away from something they know will hurt them. These things made of ice and snow didn’t care that the knights’ weapons now hacked through limbs and chest and heads with shrieking steam. The things just kept fighting, attacking, until they were nothing but chunks of ice lying in red-tinted puddles.

Sansa and Alysanne meanwhile made difficult work of their own beast. It lunged at them, content with its strategy, as the witches worked to melt its limbs off. Even then, it wriggled towards them with rows of pointed teeth.

Panting, they looked at each other. A similar thought crossing their face: that was only one monster...

One man dropped his sword, a sharp *clank* rattling over the stones. He fell to his knees, panting, shaking. The knights’ faces were paler than the snow falling around them. It sizzled against their swords, still bright orange.

The one standing looked over at the witches. A jagged, frost-lined cut outlined his jaw. The buckles of his pauldrons hung limply over his chest. “I… Thank you.”

They nodded. The ice bear they fought went down with just as much fight, taking a chunk out of Alysanne’s cloak. Ice and wood splinters lay around them.

“What…” the kneeling knight began. His teeth chattered, making his words almost unparsable. “Those things… What in the *seven hells* are they?”

Alysanne looked at Sansa, and Sansa looked past the knights. There was the truth, and there were kind half-truths, and there were outright lies. But even the truth didn’t explain what made nightmarish horrors walk the earth. Didn’t explain what brought people back to a frozen half-state hell-bent on killing. It was Winter’s doing, but how, and why?

“I don’t know,” Sansa began, gulping in the chilled air. It tasted like the fires of the blacksmith back home. It tasted like the darkness of the forests in the midst of winter. It taste like fear. She felt her limbs shaking, tried to will them steady. Best not to look a step from death herself. Not when her magic was the only thing that saved these knights. *And all the others*? What of all the countless other knights and citizens and children who were alone without witches? What of all the people who’ve already succumbed to these things?

“Just…” she continued, “be careful.”

It was lousy advice, and she knew it.

Alysanne meanwhile walked over to the knight, uncorking a small vial of wood-green sludge that would expedite the wound on his face. The blood was frozen, flaking off in chunks where the witch wiped it clean.

*There’s no time to help him.* Sansa wanted to scream. She dug her fingers hard against her stave. Stood there in the circle of debris, watching. Waiting.

As Alysanne finished giving her magic and her kind words to the brave knights, a scream tore through the plaza.

Both the witches whipped towards the sound. Looked at each other. “It came from the briar maze—”
Another scream.

South this time, closer towards the wall.

Another scream.

Another.

There were too many.

Sansa’s legs shook. If she could collapse here, let the snows smother her...

“We need to hurry.” Alysanne called out, not waiting for a reply before darting between buildings. “I’ll take the low streets. Meet you at the maze.”

Sansa didn’t have time to respond, watching Alysanne disappear through the throng of destruction and death towards the nearest scream.

Better to move than to think, to worry. Sansa sprinted up the nearby stairs to the second level of the market, keeping an eye out for people. Or, people that were alive, calling out for help (or mercy). Her throat was burning, her lungs too. Sansa was feeling the weight of sleeplessness on her muscles, dragging her away from consciousness. One second she was running to the end of the market quarter towards a man whose legs bent backwards unnaturally. The next, she was climbing crooked stairs at the sound of a second scream. Then she was at the top, half of Highgarden beneath her. It looked so wrong covered in snow.

She clutched her stave tighter. She had to do this: save them, everyone.

She just wished she could.

A shadow encased her. Moved fast, towards the center of Highgarden. Sansa skidded to a halt, staring at it. The shadow belonged to a horrid, winged creature, who landed on a parapet of the Sept. Sansa slowly, carefully stepped nearer a building in hopes that the grey shadows would cover her from its gaze.

It was too far to make out what it was. But its flesh glistened in the sun. Huge wings sending shocks of wind down to the unsuspecting streets below. Its claws held onto the spire as it rounded the Sept’s roof. Slowly, it scanned Highgarden, from the endless rose gardens, to the godswood (whose red leaves peaked above white walls, too fitting for the horrors), to the winding plazas and streets that sat between the massive walls. Its gaze found Sansa (or so she thought). Her chest tightened, twisted, grew as suddenly icy as the falling snow. The thing’s wings spread open, It roared. The harrowing sound echoed between the buildings, shaking Sansa to her very core.

And just like that, the thing leapt off the Sept’s spire, chunks of tile and concrete sliding down to the streets below. Sansa lost it as it dove down behind towers.

A scream. The same that called her up those stairs. With burning lungs and a hammering heart, Sansa sprinted towards it.

A girl – hardly older than Sansa, with dull red hair and tears streaming down her cheeks – backed away from a monster. Its limbs were thin and pointed, standing taller than some of the buildings surrounding it. The allusion of a face, maw opened wide with teeth just as sharp and glistening in the sun. It lunged an arm at the girl, embedding a solid foot into the stone wall behind
her. The girl screamed, scrambling away, legs caught in her skirts.

Sansa lunged fire at the thing. “Get away from her!” Another ball of fire. Steam encased the monster, revealing melting ice and a dark, angry gaze.

It shot towards Sansa with both of it’s sharp arms. So fast she hadn’t time to move, one arm on either side of her. She channeled fire, stopping halfway. Weaving beneath its arms as its legs bent to stab deep into the wall.

“Run away!” she yelled at the girl who was collapsed at the base of a building, sobbing.

To the monster. It was working to pry its limbs from the stone. Her fire helped it last time; this time, she couldn’t miss. Sansa screamed as she willed her magic to burn hotter, brighter, tearing through the chest of the thing.

All that was left were four jagged icicles jammed into the stone.

She collapsed, too. Couldn’t help it. Sansa felt her lungs were on fire, all of her muscles. Her heart was beating simultaneously too slow and too fast, like it might stop any second.

Gods. She wasn’t sure how they were supposed to survive. It took too much magic to obliterate one monster (that, and she was so tired. Her last dose of stranger’s eye tea was wearing off. She could feel the heaviness in her limbs as she sat there). And there were so many of them. So many, too many.

Sansa looked to the other side of the small plaza, at the nameless girl with red hair. She saw Sansa staring, stared back. The girl tried to say Thank you, but no sound came from her lips. They turned up in a smile though. One. Sansa saved one girl, ignoring the countless bodies she passed on the way to her.

The girl stood slowly on shaking legs. There was a cut on her face. Sansa knew she had to save the others (there were screams still, and the promise to meet back with Alysanne). But the thought of resting for a few more seconds as she tended to the girl’s wound sounded delightful. Sansa stood too, her legs just as shaking. Momentary relief flooded the girl’s face before the fear set in again. And then a dark shadow swallowed them.

No.

It landed with a resounding crash, chunks of stone shooting out from its massive clawed feet. Sansa shielded her face, feeling rocks bruise her arms. One smacked her in the stomach.

No.

It was twice her size, and far more hideous up close. It looked rotten, like it had been decaying and festering for weeks before the ice froze it all in place. Holes in its leathery wings were patched with ice.

It paid Sansa no mind, picking up the girl who had begun to run away. Her body froze as its claws wrapped around her. She knew: this was it, she was dead.

Sansa willed her magic against it, but she was exhausted. Only a small flame licked at the thing’s wings, loosening the ice enough from a few holes. The monster cocked its head at Sansa, amused. Looked at the girl in his claws (screaming without sound, tears falling off her cheeks). And leapt away.
“No!”

The wind pushed Sansa down onto the ground. Seconds passed before it let up enough to wade through. Above her, the thing was out of view from the towering buildings, but she could hear the heavy beat of its wings above fighting and screaming. Sansa clambered onto her stave and kicked off into the sky.

She lost it. She didn’t know how – it was massive – but by the time Sansa cleared the roofs, she couldn’t see that thing anymore.

*No.*

Her tears were hot on her cheeks. They fell to the earth in silence.

From above, Sansa saw the havoc Winter wrought onto Highgarden. The north quarter of the castle was destroyed. Glimmers of monsters shone in the sun, spreading further into the heart of Highgarden towards the gardens and towards the castle proper. From above, Sansa saw innumerable black dots, unmoving. She started to count them but stopped herself. She didn’t want to know how many had perished *because of her*.

To the maze, then, she thought, turning towards it. Assuming Alysanne hadn’t succumbed to whatever monstrosities were waiting for her.

Something had Sansa looked one last time at the heavy greens and spots of colors surrounding the central towers. Because it might very well be the last time Sansa saw such beauty? Maybe. She could spare two seconds to look, to marvel at what beauty Highgarden had only an hour ago. And in an hour? What would remain of glittering white walls and endless fields of flowers?

Then she saw it.

Her.

Sansa zoomed towards the rose gardens, weaving through spires and falling snow. *Faster faster faster* she yelled at herself, at her stave. She couldn’t let her *die*.

One arm outstretched. Sansa grabbed hold of her, slammed into her, just as the beast slammed both fists down.

Towering rose bushes scraped at them as Sansa wove through the gardens, moving as fast as she could. She dared a look back, to see if that thing was chasing them, unsatisfied that its prey got away. She couldn’t see it through the thick of green.

The end of Sansa’s stave ricocheted off the stone, sending her and the girl tumbling forward. She could feel where the stones scraped a over her cheeks. Felt

*I did it.*

The girl turned around, breathless.

“Margaery,” Sansa managed to breathe out.

Her friend looked at her, fear and surprise and a little bit of relief mixing with the snow and dirt and blood on her face. Worse was the blood on her arm: the sleeve of her cloak was ripped, revealing spots of unmarred skin among all of the crimson.
“Sansa… You’re…”

You too, Sansa thought. Her mouth wouldn’t move. A racking sob began in her chest, but caught there, filling her with a simultaneous lightness and emptiness.

“What…” Margaery began, looking back from where they came. They could hear the roar of the beast (assuming it was the same one). They could hear the thudding of roars all around them, and the screams too. A nightmarish version of the days they spent in the gardens marveling at the flowers and listening to birdsong.

“He’s here…” Sansa managed. And there it was: the sob. A wretched, mangled cry of everything that had happened. Not just today, but in these past weeks. The turmoil of emotions let loose in shuddering sobs.

Gods, what she wouldn’t give to go back in time and stop herself from dancing!

“Who?”

It was then – with her friend’s beauty marred by so much filth and fear – that Sansa realized she never did tell her the story. Of the dance, of the roses, of the god that foolishly thought he loved her.

There was too much to say and not nearly enough time. They needed to go back. To fight off the creatures, to save whoever hadn’t fallen to them yet. To figure out how to make it all stop (and though Sansa dared a guess, she wasn’t sure if she wanted to admit it. Not without first running it past Olenna. Only, the new realization that Sansa had seen Olenna for the last time sent another sob creaking out of her throat).

Sansa shook her head. Stood on unsteady legs, reaching for her stave. “It’s… He’s…” She helped Margaery to stand, trying her best to ignore how painful her arm looked, and how much blood had pooled around it as they sat there for what must have been only seconds. “He’s here. Winter.”

The rose bushes rustled. Stems cracked.

The beast jumped at Margaery, its back leg whacking Sansa back in the process. Her friend cried out as its claws dug into her injured arm.

It had stalked them. Artfully, without making a single sound. Maybe they weren’t as mindless as Sansa thought.

She climbed on her stave again, feeling sluggish. There was so much of the ice bear, and not enough energy to blast it away like Sansa had the other monster. But running away… They could find other witches, help them out. They were stronger together. They could save Highgarden together.

The monster reared back, a bellowing roar shaking the roses around them in fear.

“Margaery! No!”

Sansa lunged for her friend. She had pulled her away from its strike before, she could do it again. She had to.

A wall of wind knocked Sansa back,
It pushed her down, slamming her with such force that Sansa couldn’t do anything but wait for it to fade. Through strands of her hair whipping around, she saw Margaery was still there, alive.

And she saw it.

It was back, that horrid, flying thing from the plaza.

It landed with a heavy thump atop the ice bear, shattering it. Clawed feet slammed hard enough to even rip stones from the pathway. It dropped something at its feet: a girl, red-haired. But she was crying, screaming, pleas to the gods that even Sansa knew they wouldn’t hear.

Not the same girl Sansa had saved in the plaza.

A huge, heavy weight sat in her stomach as she listened to the girl’s cries. As she looked at the mangled mess of red hair.

The monster looked at Margaery, who stared up in horror at the thing, frozen in fear. She tried to shuffle backwards slowly, but the pain in her arm was too much, Sansa could tell.

And then the thing slowly turned to look at Sansa. Cocked its head at her. Back to Margaery.

Deciding something?

Deciding on Margaery. Reaching for her despite her best efforts to flee.

No.

Not her, not her friend.

Sansa stood. Her body wobbled, so desperately wanting to curl up and succumb to the warm nothingness of sleep. She held her stave with both hands, feeling her muscles ache with the tightness. Willed every last ounce of her magic – of herself – into the spell, shooting it with a scream.

Her stave exploded.

Sansa flew backwards, clutching onto the bottom half of the wood. Splinters shot in every direction, the head of the stave clattering on the stone tiles some twenty feet away. A sliver of wood caught in the gap between her cloak and glove, slicing a thin red line.

A massive hole tore through the monster’s wings. It howled into the greying skies.

A new flurry of wind whipped around them. Only, the monster hadn’t taken off. It stood there, Margaery fighting in its iron grip. Her breaths were ragged. It stared at Sansa, fury in its dark, deathless eyes.

The wind whipped up, faster and faster. Rose petals tore through the air as numerous as snowflakes. The wisps of sunlight through the clouds caught them, turning Sansa’s vision into a shifting rainbow. Through gaps of color, the monster stood. Through gaps of color, Margaery slowly stopping fighting.

And then, the wind stopped. The petals sank to the ground, shattering into millions of multicolored pieces.

And then...

Winter.
Only, he wasn’t the same shifting thing that watched her dance in the darkened copse of trees. Or the wisps of ice as he made roses spring from her feet. Or the half-formed man of ice and snow as he pulled her into him, before exploding into millions of snowflakes.

Winter was a man. Tall, jet-black hair with streaks of ice. His skin was almost as white as snow, pale blue veins crossing beneath the white. But it was skin, human skin on a human body.

Winter was alive.

The monster presented Margaery to Winter, like a cat that had caught and wounded a bird. Winter stared at the witch with furrowed brows, uncertain who she was or what he was meant to do with her. A second passed before Winter shook his head, a small, unceremonious movement.

The monster flung Margaery away. She crashed into the naked rose bushes with a heavy crack.

“No!”

Winter looked at Sansa now. A wicked sense of realization dawning on his human features: cool grey eyes widening in glee, an equally icy smile pulling at pale lips. As if to say: Ah, here she is! My lady of Summer! Winter stared at Sansa for a long time, too many heartbeats hammering between her ribs as she could do nothing but stare back. As much as she wanted to rush for Margaery, to see if she was okay, Sansa feared it would be worse to look away from the god.

Finally, he flicked his wrist at the beast. That icy monstrosity meanwhile leaped out of the garden (with some difficulty, half of his wings missing), taking the other girl with it (she was still crying, pleading for a sweet death). To where, Sansa couldn’t say. She wondered if the things could feel. If it took pleasure in watching Margaery or the countless other girls fly through the air and land with a final thud. If it thrived in doing Winter’s work. Or if it truly was just a thing, lifeless and heartless and cold, so cold.

Sansa struggled to look away from Winter to her friend. She could only see Margaery from the corner of her eye. Was that her chest moving (alive), or was it only the winds blowing at her skirts (dead)? By the Stranger, please, she prayed. Please don’t let her die.

Winter tilted his head at her. It was...strange, among other things, seeing him as a human. It was one thing to assume that the wisps of wind and shadow were him, to maybe pretend that all of this was a sick nightmare Sansa was impatiently waiting to awake from. But now, there was a body to his cold actions, a face to his heartless machinations. Now, she might have forgotten he wasn't a powerful god.

Save for the crown of icicles that sat crooked upon his head.

He took one step towards her, lacing fingers in front of him. Winter wore a lord’s clothes, fine silk and velvet in a rich sky blue embroidered in silver. Ice clung to the edges of the fabric. All of it brought out the lifeless veins snaking beneath his skin. Sansa tried not to think if the lord who owned them was dead. She knew the answer anyways.

“My lady, why would you get rid of your beautiful hair…”

Sansa had meant to stop dyeing her curls when she came to Highgarden. But it had become a habit, and though some witches (notably Margaery) teased her about it, Sansa couldn’t help but worry that stopping was worse. And she had been right: so many innocent girls with red hair brought to Winter in hopes that it was his Summer. What made him change and look for brown-haired girls?
Remembering that Sansa had dyed her hair? Or (worse) the fact that he had made quick work of every red-haired girl in Highgarden and had grown desperate?

She didn’t want to think about how many people died because of her. Because of this supposed love.

“Please. I.” Sansa couldn’t form a sentence. She had to force the words past her lips, past the choking sobs she barely contained in her throat. A glance at Margaery. *She’s not dead*. If Sansa kept thinking that, then maybe she wouldn’t be.

Even if Margaery still hadn’t moved.

Winter took one more step. He was cautious, and careful, but relentless. Sansa knew he would stop at nothing. One look at what he’d done to Highgarden was proof enough.

She was still on the ground, afraid that her legs would give out if she stood. A weakness Sansa wasn’t willing to expose to the god. Stared up at him, and he her. Disbelief, and uncertainty, and fear.

They just stared at each other for a long time, echoes of destruction carrying up from the streets below. It sounded quieter than before; though, Sansa might have only been imagining. There was no telling that the beasts would stop until every living thing was dead.

Winter, meanwhile, seemed content to stare at her, a crooked smile frozen on his lips. Assessing her with human eyes. Sansa tried not to think if *this* manifestation was someone. If somehow becoming a man meant stealing the body of a living soul.

Still, he said and did nothing else. Was he waiting for her to say something, or do something? Would he have liked it if Sansa ran away and put up a fight?

Movement caught Sansa’s gaze. Olenna had found her way through the fighting and ripped gardens, lifting Margaery up to her feet. The girl let loose a groan of pain – thank gods she was alive! – before collapsing all of her weight onto the old witch. Sansa didn’t like the way Margaery’s feet dragged over the dirt. Sansa didn’t like the way Olenna (satisfied that the girl had survived, if barely) looked at Sansa with a fierce determination.

It was Olenna’s stare that gave Sansa pause. As if to say: *Don’t.*

But what other choice did Sansa have? Winter was *here*, in Highgarden. Had she flown to Dorne, to Essos, to some remote island floating between the continents, she knew the god would still find her. He was *desperate*. Determined.

She clutched the broken half of her stave, feeling that wayward splinter dig further into her wrist. The blood trickled down inside her glove.

Slowly, carefully, Sansa scrambled to her feet. Some sliver of luck kept her upright. Behind Winter, behind the gardens frozen over with ice and snow, those monsters continued their ravaging. Innocent people screamed as they tried to run away. Innocent people lay dead where only an hour ago they had their whole future ahead of them.

Sansa stared at Winter. He stated back, amused. “Tell your…. Tell them to *stop*. Please. *Please don’t kill anyone else*.

“Why?” Winter let out a chilling laugh, one that sent a shiver down Sansa’s spine. It was like the howl of wind through trees, the biting sting of it high up in the Eyrie with no one around to hear.
it. “Oh my sweet Summer…” He stretched out his arms. “Doesn’t this world look so much better shrouded in ice?”

The ground beneath him was seeping with ice, spreading throughout the gardens. The nearest rose bushes were frozen, encased in glittering icicles. There was a tendril of it creeping towards Sansa. It slowly wrapped around where she stood, cautious.

A flash of memory: flickering torchlight, braying animals, two small children huddled beneath a woolworn blanket. Sansa inhaled the crisp air, looked up from where Winter ached to touch her with his icie. The chill stabbed her lungs as she said, “If you don’t stop them, I will not – can not – love you.”

Winter seemed to remember that night, too, his cool eyes widening. The ice around her didn’t press closer, but it continued to dance around her legs. And though he might remember the way those children huddled away from him, or the deathly pallor of their brother as Sansa tried to save him, Winter did or said nothing to call of the icy things terrorizing Highgarden. Behind her beating heart were the screams. Something rumbled, the collapse of a building, vibrations running up Sansa’s legs.

Winter cocked his head at the same sounds, his smile never faltering. “Do you hear that, my sweet?” Somehow, his smile grew. “Our kingdom doesn’t have to hide in the north. We can rule all of these human lands. Together. We can finally be free.”

He was mad. Hungry for this newfound power. The freedom of his human body and the freedom of exploring lands beyond the North. Sansa worried that as much as Winter yearned for her, he yearned for this: this spreading of his kingdom, this destruction. Were the screams like music to his new-human ears? She didn’t know why she expected Winter to act with reason. Not when (as Sansa often forget, whether willingly or not) that before her stood the god of cold and storms and snows. The god of death.

A body shot through the sky, colliding with the edge of the garden wall, sliding down in a red-smeared trail. It was hard to tell who he was save for a knight, armor clinking against the stone. Each limb was at a different angle, his head staring behind him. White frost dusted the gaping hole in his chest. The corpse didn’t move. Winter’s crooked smile grew wider.

Sansa lifted the jagged half of her stave to her throat. The splintered ends tickled. A plea in the name of love wasn’t going to sway Winter. But perhaps this would, plunging headfirst into his domain of death.

“Stop.” Sansa repeated. Her word left as a faint puff of white. Winter shifted his gaze from where the stave gently poked at her skin, up to her eyes. She shivered. “If you don’t stop killing people. If you don’t leave this world alone. I… I will kill myself.” Try as she might to keep her voice strong, there was a waver. One that Winter picked up on.

“My lady cannot die.” Winter laughed, that same unsettling shiver of winds. Only, he looked uncertain: could his Summer perish by her human hands? And if so, what did that mean for his own new fleshy body? His human fingers twitched as he stared at her. Winter did not blink, which only made the heaviness of his gaze that more unnerving.

She pressed the stave onto her neck just enough to prick her. Sansa felt a trickle of blood slither down her neck. It didn’t make it far, freezing against her skin long before it snaked beneath her cloak. It tickled against the wind.

Winter motioned to stop her, but kept himself in check. Pursed his lips at this newfound
bravery – or foolishness. Would he stay himself if she had the courage to jam the wood straight through her neck? Sansa’s hand shook – against the cold, against the weight of the stave, against the fear – though she did her best to steel herself.

Thin tendrils of wind wrapped around her legs, up her chest, settling around her wrist. Sansa felt it (him) gently nudging her arm away. Whispering on the wind to let go, to not act so rash my sweet. She fought against him, the wood digging that much deeper. Winter saw this and loosened his grip. Did not release it entirely. Sansa felt those wisps of icy winds wrap all around her, snaking beneath the folds of her clothes. It was an effort not to shiver.

She took a deep breath. “Stop this, and…” Don’t, she practically heard Olenna say inside her head. They were still there, huddled behind a rose bush. Sansa saw the movement of the old woman’s lips, the icy pallor of her friend. In her head: the innocent farmers and knights and children running away from wintry monstrosities, cries cut short.

Sansa licked her lips; they were cracked, chilled.

“Stop this, all of this. No more killing, no more terrorizing, and… And I’ll go with you.”

Those tendrils of wind pressed against her skin, squeezing her tighter and tighter until she gasped for air.

Winter took a single step towards her. Sansa (though against her better judgement, and against the clamoring shouts in her head to run) stayed where she was, stave in hand. Another step, another, until he was just in front of her. His body looked to shrink, lowering himself to her own height. It was worse, Sansa thought, staring into the eyes of the god like this. Up close, she thought she saw flecks of green among the grey. To mimic the lady that truly was his Summer?

They stood there just like how they had been that evening in the woods by the Queenscrown. Her heart hurt, thumping between her temples. She felt it, heard it. And in the same moments, she didn’t hear anything else. The roars of beasts, the tumbling of the castle, the shrieks. Everything had gone silent.

Slowly, Winter reached out with human hands, tossing her broken stave to clatter on the stones. His fingers were cold where they cradled her face. Worse was the chill shooting down her spine as Winter, ever so softly and ever so gently (too gently), caressed a thumb over her skin. It left a trail of frost in its wake. Up his thumb went, over cheekbone and just beneath her eye. The tears froze at his touch. Had she been crying? Sansa hadn’t realized it.

It was just like how they had been that evening in the woods by Queenscrown. Only this time, no one was going to rush in and save her.

Sansa carefully glanced at Olenna, Margaery propped up around her shoulder. Her friend wasn’t dead, thank the gods. Olenna was saying things to Margaery: it’ll be okay, or maybe she always was a fool of a witch. Though she spoke to Margaery, her gaze was focused on Sansa. There lived a quiet fury distorting her once-warm features. Restraint showed in how tightly she held to her rosewood stave, in how she seemed to ignore the nearly-unconscious witch hanging off of her.

What are you doing? she silently asked. Don’t. We can figure out a way to get out of this.

But they hadn’t. There were days spent racking their brains, and sunsets setting with nothing to show for it. There were nights spent scouring the library for something, anything, and there was nothing to show for it. There was running away, a lot of it. And look where that left the world! Highgarden was in shambles, and who’s to say Winter didn’t terrorize the rest of Westeros on his
journey South? Who’s to say Winter didn’t already destroy Winterfell? Her home, her family.

A knot tightened around her throat as Sansa gave the old woman a curt nod. As if to say: *Thank you for your many lessons, and your friendship, and even for all your berating as we gossiped beneath.*

As if to say: *Please don’t try to save me. I’m saving all of you.*

Back to Winter, before Sansa could read Olenna’s response. His fingers didn’t relent their grip on her, nor did his thumbs (he was using both hands now) stop trailing back and forth over her cheeks. Marveling? Exploring? Did he see his frozen marks from before, where his hands burned her skin? Maybe. It was hard to guess what was going on in the god’s mind.

Sansa had an idea that there was a single word echoing: *mine. Mine mine mine.*

“Do you promise?” she asked, licking her lips. It was an effort to fight against the shiver from his touch. Winter looked from where his thumbs brushed over her skin to her eyes. Sansa added, “Promise to… To stop this, this killing, this… All of this?” A pause. “And I’ll be yours.”

“Yes.” But whether in response to her question, or in triumph to her *willingness*, she couldn’t say.

“Come,” he said to her. It sounded so loud, and it was then Sansa heard truly how *quiet* the world had become. No more cries for help, no more crashing stones, no more mangled screams of humans or monsters. No more *death*. Winter (for the moment, at least) made true to his word to *stop*. And now Sansa had to make true on her promise.

She didn’t say anything as he lowered his hands from her face, trailing down her arms until he grasped her own. Even through gloves, his touch burned frozen.

Snows whirled around them, catching the glimmers of sunlight in sparkling yellows. The world flickered in and out of existence: the lush gardens, towers of white stone, towers of blue ice, Olenna and Margaery, a sea of trees drooping with snow. Sansa skirts flapped erratically around her legs. She closed her eyes, focusing on the burning touch of the god. Ignoring everything else.

Winter pulled her close then. His lips tickled her ear, and Sansa felt as much as heard his words, a thread of ice weaving through every of her veins. There was no mistaking *fear* at his declaration. Fear, and other emotions she dared not dwell on, not when the blood of so many lay fresh on her skin.

Sansa heard Winter’s quiet voice echo inside her head long after the words disappeared. “Come, my sweet Summer. My beautiful queen.”
the palace

Chapter Notes

[Have I said recently how much I love you guys for reading this story? Because I do. And I really love this story, too, so here’s hoping you guys love where I’ll be taking you guys these last few chapters! :*]

It was the quiet that unsettled her at first. Hardly a whisper of wind through trees in the distance, or a single howl of wolf, bird, wayward spirit. There was the rumbling, manic pounding of her heart, and beyond that: stillness. And all around her was white, and ice, and snow.

Sansa stood in the center of it all. Towering halls glistening in the midday sun – a sun almost as white as the snows surrounding her, and dipping close enough to the horizon for a lover’s kiss. Shadows cut black knives across snowy floor, untouched by human or beast. Snowflakes fell softly around her, as if afraid to disturb the tentative balance that existed so far away from anyone and anything. And no one alive save for her.

Well, unless she counted the god of winter and storms and death.

He watched her as she slowly spun around, soaking in his kingdom. It was so different than Highgarden, with its endless gardens and sweet scents and specks of colors painting everything bright and alive. The closest thing to that was sunlight bouncing off the towers in rich golds and sharp blues and sea greens.

It was a palace of ice.

She finished her circle, facing Winter again. His blue lips were parted, wisps of frost escaping them. She imagined not once since they landed had he taken his eyes off of her. Specks of white clung to his pale skin. Winter smiled at her. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Sansa glanced again at the towers, the parapets, the gates. The trees surrounding them beyond the thick ice walls – they were standing in the center of an endless sea of trees, watching, waiting. Pale silhouettes of mountains stood further in the distance, their peaks shrouded in mist. Back to the palace, with its winding towers stretching towards clouds, and the balconies empty of onlookers. Something about it was familiar. But also not too familiar. Like a place she might have visited once in a dream.

Still, she couldn’t deny the beauty in it. She nodded. Too afraid that opening her mouth would release a scream, a cry, a wail of I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.

It lingered there comfortably in the space between her ribs and her heart. Stretching, tearing her chest apart until she gasped in the sharp frozen air.

Sansa wondered how she looked. Like a frenzied animal, at least. Cornered, trapped. She felt that way: tired, hungry, and empty. And afraid. But, the fear that should have been there, swallowing her from the inside out, was muted. Something else pushed back the fear, jamming it back between the slits of her ribs. Sansa didn’t try to dwell on it.
Winter was still smiling as winds whistled through the courtyard, spinning round and round his body. Sunlight pierced his skin. He was leaving her.

“W-wait!” Sansa reached out for him. Chills shot up her arm where her skin passed through him. As if her human body could stop a god.

In a way, though, it had. Had it really been minutes since she proclaimed herself his? Had it really been an hour since the first snows fell over Highgarden, and the first nightmares swarmed over the walls? Sansa didn’t want to think about how many people stared up wordlessly into the skies with pale skin torn from bones, or pierced in two, or smashed against the walls in a crumpled assumption of a body.

Winter’s body reformed solid again, with those same dark eyes and frozen skin. He stared at her, confused (or, what he thought human confusion was. It was hard for Sansa to tell what was him and what was him acting the way he thought he should. Winter had been around for centuries, millennia. He must have observed enough humans to know how to pretend to be one. At least, enough of one).

Sansa looked back at him, slowly lowering her hand. Her veins tickled beneath her skin. She was still so tired, but the thought of being stranded miles and miles away, trapped in a palace of ice and snow, alone. She didn’t want to be alone.

“Then I shall make you company.”

Had she said that out loud?

She nodded, not sure if manners mattered to a god. “Thank you.” And wrestled with that growing unease that should have settled in the second she felt Winter’s winds wrapping them back in Highgarden. Highgarden! Good gods, how could she have forgotten in these past minutes? Olenna propping up a near-dead Margaery (whose breathing was too short and ragged), or all of the innocent people who died because Winter let his creatures loose on the city. Was it a farce, all to get her to come back with him? Was he clever enough to know not just how to imitate a human’s look and mannerisms, but their cunning and wits? Sansa felt a sinking weight in her stomach, threatening to pull her deep down into the snow. He’s lied he’s lied he’s lied.

Sansa clenched her fingers, trying to warm them in the meat of her palm. “And, what of your promise?”

Hardly minutes ago, Winter had shown how easily he could make good on his promise with silence. A stillness that rang in her ears, even now, so unused to air without screams and cries for help. But with their departure here hundreds and hundreds of miles away, did those horrid nightmares start their killing again? Did those icy beasts tear through streets and buildings until there wasn’t a single thing remaining with warm blood coursing beneath skin? Sansa half didn’t want to know.

Winter, at least, had the gall to look offended. “I am doing as you said, my lady. You urged me to stop the...killing,” (he said it like it was a trivial thing). “And though we are loathe to stop, we shall. Because in return, you are here. You are mine.”

It wasn’t a question, but the way he said it made it seem that way. Sansa couldn’t do anything else but reply with a shaky nod. Was that why he brought her here before he summoned away his army of dead?

So she couldn’t run away.
There it was: that fear, bubbling up inside her and lodging in her throat.

Winter must have noticed it, approaching her with his icy hands and wrapping them through her hair. Sansa fought against the shiver shooting from her head down her spine. Worse, Sansa fought against the urge to press back into his touch. *I’m just afraid, and alone, that’s all.*

Carefully, she stepped away, feeling the pads of his fingers kiss her neck as she moved. Winter let her move. At least, far enough away. Sansa glanced at the gates made of solid ice embedded in the thick snowy walls. They wouldn’t move, not unless Winter willed them to. And Sansa knew he wouldn’t want to let his Summer run away.

Sansa looked back to the god. “I...” Shook her head. No, of course not.

Except Winter wasn’t going to let her thoughts go unheard. “Is there a question you have?”

A million of them, none of which she trusted the god to tell her truthful answers.

She chewed the inside of her lip as the millions of questions settled on a hundred. Sorting through them, not sure even *where* to start. How many people had the opportunity to talk with an old god? To probe into their wants, their desires. Things humans never really considered them to have. They controlled nature, the seasons, animals and the tides. They didn’t *have* wants or desires.


This god, at least, had one desire. Sansa saw herself, small and shivering, reflected in his dark eyes.

“Those...things...” she began, licking her lips. “They are...alive?”

Winter cocked his head at her. Blinked once, long and slow, as he assumed humans did when faced with confusion. “Nothing *truly* dies, my sweet.” A glance to the world behind Sansa before looking back. “They *are* dead, yes. And alive. And move as I say, just like the I have willed the winds to praise you with every snowflake, or the mountains to howl your name during storms. This—” he stretched his arms out, “—is all mine to control.”

*And now that I’m here in your kingdom...*  

Sansa didn’t finish the thought. She chewed her other cheek, feeling a bump where she had bit it earlier. It was still sore.

“And what of things that have been dead for years?” Sansa continued, already anticipating what he was going to say. “Could you... Could they come back?”

His dark eyes narrowed. A light breeze wound through the palace, and Sansa wondered whether it was nature, or a sliver of his power. She supposed they were one and the same. The wind ruffled the ice in his hair, the heavy robe that sat on his frame. “Yes. But they would not be the same as when they were flesh and blood.”

*And what of my mother?*

Sansa couldn’t bring the question out of her mouth. Somehow, some way, if she didn’t ask it, it wasn’t true. So she deflected with, “Then, show all of those people you...killed...a kindness. Burn their bodies.” *Don’t let them become those things.*

Winter hadn’t been expecting that, nor her. Had he been human, he would have been blinking
in bewilderment, mouth agape, a crease between his brows. Instead, he just stared at her with frost catching his dark hair and eyes fixed on her. “If I do that… If I have the power to do that, my sweet, will that make you love me?”

*Love…*

That’s all that was on Winter’s mind since she first unknowingly wriggled herself into his spot of the dance.

*He doesn’t love me*, she thought. *He loves his Summer. He loves the idea that I love him, that I could*. Sansa didn’t let the thought survive, squashing it against the sides of her skull before it could worm down and suffocate her heart. “I...think I might love you. In time.”

The god’s face perked at that, something almost like a smile. Almost. Wind whistled through his dark curls. Had sunlight not set the spiderweb of veins beneath his skin alight in a gossamer of blue, Sansa might have thought him to be *real*. A real human, at least. And maybe one she could find herself loving.

Only, this thing – this god, this charade of a human – just slaughtered *hundreds* for her sake.

And this god stepped towards her, reaching again for her face with his icy hands, and leaned in to place a single kiss on the side of her forehead. It burned. But his lips were soft.

He spoke into her skin. “I shall return, my beautiful Summer. Do not run away again; it’s ever tiring trying to find you.”

Sansa blinked the pain of his touch away, feeling the prick of tears begin to freeze. “A-again?” Oh, of course. She hid in Highgarden, and not once did he stop trying to find her. He scoured all the North for her, and had she not sparked whatever connection they had by touching his probing snowflakes as they cautiously littered the stones of Highgarden, how many people would still be alive?

She thought of that poor red-haired girl. Cowering as an ice monstrosity loomed ever closer. Only, Sansa wasn’t there to save her. The girl made hardly a sound as an icicle pierced her chest in half.

Winter smiled as he moved away, just enough to look at her. Was that *sadness* in his eyes? Or merely a trick of the Northern sun? Somehow, Sansa knew the god couldn’t feel *actual* human emotions like guilt or grief. No matter whatever madness set in him as he searched for Summer. His fingers trailed down Sansa’s cheeks, cupping her jaw, before sliding away. “Get some rest, my love.”

In the dying flurry of his departure, two things clawed up from the snows beneath her.

Sansa jumped back, reaching for her stave that wasn’t there. Had this been a ploy? Did Winter only bring her here to *kill* her?

Worse: did he bring her here to kill her, only to bring her back as a thing of ice? To be his queen for eternity?

There was little magic left in her veins, a dull thrum. But she could pull enough to burn herself alive before that nightmare came true.

Up and up they clawed out of the snows, ruining the untouched ground. Bones poked through skin and leather. The stood to their full height (only a few inches taller than Sansa), and that
was that. They stood there. Waiting.

The dead men stared at her with unchanging expressions. Half of one’s face was chewed off, leaving jagged bits of skull poking through an empty eye socket. The other man was missing an arm.

Sansa looked at the snows beneath her feet. How many of them – humans and animals and gods-knew-what – lurked just beneath the white?

Up at them again. The half-faced one tilted his head at her, like Winter did so often.

His words came down like the snowflakes, soft and quiet: *I shall make you company*.

They weren’t what Sansa was expecting, but now she wasn’t sure what she was expecting. For Winter to bring her company in the shape of living creatures? To steal away other innocent girls to gossip with Sansa?

He was the god of death. Sansa should do well not to forget that.

The frozen man pointed to one of the many towers (at least, she thought they were both men. It was hard to tell. Ice and frost had eaten most of them away). He didn’t move after that. It was unsettling.

Sansa looked up at the tower – it was the biggest, round, and shooting up from the center of the courtyard – then back to the man. “Are you...trying to show me something?”

The other one nodded. A one-armed knight. He must have been a knight however many decades ago, a tattered gambeson stuck to his withered frame. He opened his mouth to speak. His jaw clattered against his chest before lodging in the snows. Wind whistled through bone.

How much could they think, and feel? How *alive* were undead creatures? Did they have the capacity to do things on their own, or were they puppets of Winter? Sansa tried not to dwell on that thought, and the fact that so many of them easily and willingly combed through Highgarden, murdering anyone who wasn’t Sansa.

“They…” She combed her fingers through her hair, catching on lumps of cold. She tugged them free, finding icicles where Winter’s hands had threaded in her curls. The chilly ghost of his touch lingered on her skin. “Lead the way.”

They understood that, at least, taking one step towards the tower before waiting for Sansa. She followed them as they climbed up an exterior stair and across a balcony towards that tower. Meanwhile, Sansa looked around, eyeing those thick, massive gates. Unmoving. She carefully listed to the side, staring at the endless sea of snow-capped trees beyond the palace. At least forty feet, maybe fifty. *There* was her way out, if only she could survive a jump from that high.

Sansa tried not to think how easy it would have been to fly back home had her stave not exploded.

*Home* …

Her feet stopped in the center of the balcony, just shy of the archway. The guards turned to look at her. Sansa stared back at them. At the ice that glistened in the sunlight. Listened as the quietness at the end of the world filled her head.

*This* was her new home. Her new life.
With no one around to save her.

* * *

“Looks like it’s going to snow.”

Jeyne used to hit her everytime Sansa said it (something she may have stolen from Arya). It was probably her friend’s reaction of *Oh gods not this again* that made the ridiculous joke funnier than it was to Sansa. Especially in the midst of winter, with a storm already raging outside, her and Jeyne cuddled around a fire with furs and the scent of freshly-ground herbs filling the air.

Only, she was alone now. No roaring fire to keep her warm (though the inside of the palace was surprisingly less cold than Sansa would have thought. It went at odds with her senses, who told her she should be freezing). No heavy furs or thick wool socks. No just-picked herbs and steaming cups of tea. No friends.

Sansa turned from the window to her new friends. She preferred calling them that than *guards*, jailors. Pretending herself more of a visitor to Winter’s kingdom than a prisoner. Sansa wondered whether her mother thought the same when he stole her from a copse of trees. Did Winter allow her the same luxuries as he was giving Sansa? Or had Catelyn Stark been brave enough to avoid Winter’s advances entirely. Losing herself to free herself. Sansa needed to ask the god himself, or at least, figure out a way to word it without giving her own charade away. He was pretending to be human, and she an all-powerful goddess. What a pair they made.

Neither of the figures moved. Eye was standing just inside her room, with Arm keeping watching outside. Sansa wished they could talk, if not to keep her company, but to know their names. Their pasts. Did they have families of their own, children and grandchildren? How long ago had they succumbed to the clutches of frost? Long enough that their loved ones remembered who they were, patiently waiting by the window each night for the sound of hoofs or for the shadowy sails approaching over the horizon?

Sansa tried to give them stories, talking to them without expecting responses. Eye was once a brave knight who was made to do penance searching for a lost princess in the cold tundras beyond the Wall. He made it to the palace where a monster was holding her. He slew it, saved the princess, but there was only one horse and not enough rations for the both of them. *Go south, and don’t stop until you reach the Wall*, he told her. Sent the horse galloping away as the princess’ cries faded into the wind. She promised to come back for him. She didn’t.

Sometimes, it was nice to lose herself in a story of her own creation. One where she wasn’t irrevocably tied to an all-powerful god and his supposed desires.

Instead, Arm and Eye stood there. Listening as she rambled the silence away.

Flickering fire flashed in her eyes. All it would take was a single burst of flames, and her friends/guards would unwillingly be set free. A burst of flames, and Sansa would be completely alone.

Sansa clenched her hand around nothing. She had dropped the broken half of her stave when Winter’s winds carried her North. They might still be there, lost in the gardens, splinters to match the torn flowers and broken stones. Sansa missed the comfortable weight of it, the shape of it in her fingers. A stave was a channel, not a requirement, to a witch’s magic. Sansa wasn’t entirely without her powers, at least. She could feel it warming her blood as the day turned to night to day. For want of something to do, Sansa sometimes mixed potions with the herbs she had leftover in her cloak. A new scar lined her finger, from nail to knuckle, where a jagged vial tore into her skin.
She had her magic still. Only, should something happen again – her trying to will more magic than she had, and with too much emotion tainting it – her hand would meet the same fate as splintered wood.

She turned back to the window. It had been several days now since Winter swept her away from his icy army terrorizing Highgarden. Away from the way she swore she heard (and saw) Margaery’s limp body crash against the flowers. From garrish monsters with too many fangs and too-sharp claws. Now, everything was still.

Winter had yet to return. Sansa had no idea what he was doing, or why it would have taken this long to pull his army of the frozen undead out from Highgarden. She asked him to stop his killing, to show mercy to those that had died. Had he lied? Was he rampaging throughout Westeros all while Sansa was stuck here, in his white, frozen kingdom?

He made a promise.

But he was a god. What were promises to them, when they controlled the seasons, the rise and fall of mountains and valleys, the twinkling stars above?

Far beyond in the distance, Sansa saw the solid line of the Wall. Even from here, she saw the crack in it.

There were thousands – maybe millions – of bodies trapped beneath the massive ice. How easily could Winter will them alive, to shatter the Wall completely? If then, what was stopping his army of the frozen undead from terrorizing its way from here to Dorne?

“I’m going for a walk.”

Slowly and carefully she shuffled down the spiral staircase, listening to the clattering thumps of the guards behind her. Sansa trailed her fingers along the inner spiral of the stairs as she went down down down, all the way to the courtyard below. Before, she had spent most of her days exploring the towers, walking from one to another and peering inside empty room after another. There was little decoration to be had in the palace, save for a few rooms in the main tower. The room she claimed as her own had a bed, chair, desk, and an empty wardrobe. Like a normal bedroom in a normal castle. Everything else: bare.

Up and down, over and back, Sansa spent daylight exploring. She had visited everywhere she could, remarking about what one room might be by its size. Talking Arm’s and Eye’s ears off (which might happen, Arm’s jaw lay somewhere in the main courtyard covered by snow). Sansa marveled at the beauty of the ice, like dripping water frozen in time. Awed at the array of colors, so very different whether in sunrise or sunset. And balked how the statues lining the front of the Sept each had her face on it.

Everywhere, it seemed, was hers to explore. All but one room. The highest level of the biggest tower. From outside, Sansa could see the windows circling it – huge arches that would offer a complete view of the kingdom around her.

Down down down, Sansa spiraled until she reached the archway to outside.

The fresh snow gave way beneath her boots. Sansa wrapped her cloak tightly around her shoulders, squinting at the bright sunlight. Her feet moved for her, deciding where she might spend her time today. Sansa let them. Because – despite the ice, the emptiness – she knew the castle by heart.
It was Winterfell. With its Great Keep behind her, with the balconies arching overhead as she meandered from one courtyard to the next. Here was where shipment of grain and fruits would be parceled out to the kitchen. Over there was the stables, and beyond that the glasshouse that Sansa spent far too much time in testing the plants with her magic. If she closed her eyes, Sansa could hear it: the braying of horses as dogs chased Arya through legs of serving hands; the call of riders returning from a hunt; the shuffling of feet and the quiet gossiping.

Eyes opened, and the silence returned.

But, the palace was the Eyrie, too. With massive, glittering towers piercing up from the perimeter gates. And Riverrun, a winding, frozen lake cutting beneath the castle (of which Sansa had yet to find the path to get to it below. Frozen cattails swayed along the banks). And Highgarden, with icy ivy and flowers springing forth from the cracks of the buildings. There was a trail of ice roses wherever Sansa stepped, sketching her path through her not-home. Arm and Eye stepped over them with unceremonious crunching.

Sansa had stared down at the palace from her room in the tower, the first rays of sunlight casting realization over her. She managed to keep the sobs quiet enough that her guards wouldn’t barge into her room. Home. But not home.

After the initial shock wore off, Sansa understood why the palace looked the way it did. Winter formed it from their encounters. He’d been watching her as she milled about Winterfell – the rooms with most detail the ones she spent time in the most. Like the dining hall, the library, her own room (even if it was sparse). Even the glass gardens had ice replicas of the herbs, the flowers, the vegetables. They sparkled in the sun.

He’s made it for me.

Sansa ignored the crunch of snow behind her, and even the crunch of snow beneath her. The courtyard seemed so...empty without the sounds of everyday life. There weren’t the carpenters working to rebuild one of the stairs won over by frost and rot. There weren’t the guards that nodded to her, or joked as she braved the stairs to the Library Tower for the umpteenth time. There wasn’t her family, her friends, even Old Nan, loathe as Sansa was to enjoy her company these past few weeks knowing the secrets she kept from her.

There wasn’t anybody.

Sansa looked behind her at Arm and Eye. They stared back with blank faces.

She found herself singing as she walked, up to the outer wall and staring down at the frozen lake. Trapped bubbles beneath the surface, aching to be free. Here, the wind was louder, accompanying her as she stared at the white world beyond. Singing, not loud enough that her guards could hear, but enough to keep the heavy quietness from smothering her.

A man has strength enough to build a home
And time enough to hold a child
And love enough to break a heart

The godswood was the most accurate of them all. A single, massive tree in the center surrounded by a lake coated with frost and fallen leaves. The weirwood was white, but it wasn’t a weirwood. Taller than any of the towers and halls behind her with frozen leaves drooping low enough to touch without standing on tip-toe. Sansa trailed her fingers over them. Their edges were
crusted in a thick layer of ice. Specks of light shone through them, highlighting their veins. The leaves melted beneath her fingers.

And surrounding the base of that huge tree: roses, hundreds of them, spreading out to the furthest walls. Some of the poked up from the surface of the lake, reaching for the sky far out of their reach.

It was beautiful. That, Sansa couldn’t deny.

It – the godswood, yes, but the palace itself – was like looking through the eyes of the god. This was what he saw: a world encased in ice, devoid of the warmth and life that lingered so many miles away.

And now, with Sansa here, his memory of their encounter was complete.

“Do you like it?”

Sansa startled at his voice. She hadn’t heard his approach, the whipping winds or flurry of snowflakes. Winter must have materialized elsewhere, search for her as she wandered his kingdom. Frantically? Afraid that his Summer had run off again?

And here they found themselves again, beneath the weirwood.

He looked the same, wearing the same stolen robes. Ice still coating the tips of his dark curls. Winter was smiling at her. Relief? That no, he didn’t have to look for Summer again. That yes, her still being here said something about her heart.

Sansa nodded. This time the words came forth, “Yes. It’s very beautiful.”

“Just like the one we met underneath.” Winter stepped forward, admiring the godswood. He looked at it carefully, as though assessing whether his memories of Winterfell were right. They were, even if his weirwood’s leaves weren’t crimson.

“Where did you go?” Sansa tried not to sound afraid or desperate. After the first day, she couldn’t help fearing that Winter had brought her here to rot. A trophy of sorts, sitting in his palace to have and keep and admire. She hated that in the wait, the horrid idea of being remade for him sounded better than being kept here by herself. Anything was better than being alone.

Her fantasy for Eye had hidden longing behind it, though she was sure the guards couldn’t make sense of it. She would never admit the budding idea to flee. Sure, the ground beneath the exterior wall was far too low to safely jump down, and the lake far too frozen to splash into. But Sansa could feel her magic growing the more she rested. How many miles was it to the Wall? A hundred, two. She wasn’t skilled in transformation, but Sansa could make do. Turn herself into a bird and fly south. Revive a fallen horse, or wolf, and ride it down to the Wall. Shroud herself in fire to keep at bay all of the monsters.

There was the Wall to the south (it took some time to remember which side of it she was on). Her father’s knights would be there, maybe even her half-brother. All Sansa had to do was make it from Winter’s palace the hundred miles through frozen wasteland and mountains and unknown monsters. Alive.

She would never admit the sudden relief that overcame her at Winter’s voice, that maybe she wouldn’t have to resort to that.

Winter looked up at the fake weirwood tree. Wind snuck between its leaves, sending a
shower of ice to the ground. They caught in their hair, their clothes. “Perhaps I should have brought my Summer along.”

Sansa brushed the snow from her hair. “You…?”

Winter still stared at the weirwood. “Your mercy, if I may? I cannot admit it was easy, burning human bodies with an army of ice. But it is done. And your lovely city has been spared of snows – even if it looks much better covered in white.”

“You…”

“These human bodies…” Winter mumbled, flexing his fingers in front of his face. Sansa watched the cold veins beneath skin dance. “So fragile…”

He turned to her then. And smiled. And for the first time Sansa saw it reach his eyes. Eyes she couldn’t help but notice looked a shade less dark. “Of course. I do apologize for the time I had to spend away from you.” He stepped towards her then, arms behind his back. Sansa wondered who he learned that pose from. Stopped wondering at his next words: “Anything for my queen.”

Burned. Hundreds of people burned. A much better fate than undeath. Behind him, Arm and Eye stood at the gate to the godswood. Sansa had forgotten about her guards the moment she stepped beneath the weirwood. Because – for those quiet minutes – she forgot she wasn’t home.

And now, Sansa was one debt behind. She promised herself to him; in return, he stopped the attack on Highgarden. She asked for him to fix the mess he made; in return (and in a way), he did. However the god managed to do it. She had nothing but his word and his smile.

Sansa looked back at him. Snowflakes didn’t melt where they found purchase on his cheeks, his hair. “What do...what do you want in return?”

Winter tilted his head at her. His unblinking eyes caught on a gold ray of light. Like that, she might have been led to believe he was a human. “My lady? Your presence here is enough. Your love is enough.”

Sansa licked her lips, recounting all of the stories of creatures she once loved listening to, and now often spent time recounting them to Rickon and Bran (Arya would scrunch her nose and say the stories were for babies). Of snarks that watch through bushes, waiting for children to stray too far from their mothers. Of grumkins who promise wishes in return for favors, either done already or to be completed. Regardless, they always wanted something in return for their power. She looked up at her captor.

Winter must have been thinking the same thing. His words were soft, almost gentle. “But, if you are offering…” Winter brought up his hands again, one high and one low.

Sansa took it. His fingers were cold, but they did not burn.

Winter pulled her body towards him as he began their dance. A human dance, one that Sansa’s feet remembered the steps to. Winter was just as able, matching her steps like well-rehearsed partner. There was no music to dance to save for Sansa’s heartbeat.

Around them, the last of the fading sun’s light pierced through the massive tree, setting the leaves ablaze in fiery oranges and golds. It bounced off the lake, too, and the field of roses they danced through. The world seemed to come to life just then.

So did the ghosts. Specks of light floating in the air, bouncing off their bodies as they danced
against them. Spirit lights. The leftover remains of souls trapped in this world. Sansa tried not to count them. Hundreds, at least.

He twirled her out. Sansa’s free hand trailed over a spirit light. It was warm, tickling beneath her skin to the magic that flowed in her veins. It glowed just a bit brighter.

Back into Winter’s embrace. The words fell from Sansa’s lips as easily as the dance came to her body. “You are much better at this than I would have thought.”

Winter smiled at her, turning them around. “I have spent a long time learning. It seems you have, too.”

Sansa pushed the truth of it aside. That she wasn’t really his in the sense of being Summer. The warmth from the spirit light fizzled.

Back and forth and around the lake they danced, until the sun fell behind the mountains beyond. The godswood was filled with specks of light, bouncing off the lake, the tree, the snows beneath their feet.

A question came bubbling to the surface as she spun around, staring at the thick walls of the godswood. When she came back face-to-face with the god, Sansa feared she knew the answer already, but she had to ask. “Can I go back home?”

Winter gave her the exact expression she feared, even if it was lacking in human depth. “You did not return the last time.”

“My mother…”

“Remind me. What did my– What did I do last time?”

Their dancing slowed to a gentle sway. Winter explained simply that she had asked to go home, as she was asking now. And Winter was too smitten to deny his Summer a thing, so he let her. Thinking, of course, that Catelyn was a goddess and not a human borne of skin and blood. When Winter sought her again, his Summer had perished. He didn’t seem inclined to go into details. Only that in his rage, he unleashed a storm upon Westeros. The same Sansa remembered ushered in her father’s somber affirmation of Cat’s death.

They never did find her body.

“They never did find her body.” Sansa let the god spin her around, wrapping his cold arms around her body in a slow sway to music neither of them could hear. She couldn’t fight against the sudden chill that snuck beneath her clothes, wrapping round and round each of her limbs, her chest. Sansa thought she felt his hand around her throat. As if to mimic unspoken words of You’re mine, and I will never let you leave me again. She inhaled sharply. Her lungs burned in the cold.

Winter unspun them. One hand entwined in hers, the other gently resting on her hip. Like it was a dance as ordinary as all the ones she attended. As though nothing was amiss.

Sansa found her question again. “Will you let me explore, at least? Wander through your– our kingdom?”

They were making a slow circuit around the lake, Sansa realized. The ice tree stood on the other side now, spirit lights surrounding its massive trunk. Winter paid them – or the godswood – no attention. He seemed unable to look at anything else but her. “I did. And you repaid me with–”

“You can join me.” Sansa added quickly.
Winter stared at her, with his unblinking blinking.

Sansa urged their feet to continue. “I imagine it must be lonely, ruling over…” she didn’t know how to finish it, so she didn’t. “But you don’t have to be alone anymore.”

He let her lead them in their sway. Surprised? Or something like that. Sansa couldn’t imagine her mother relenting to the same degree that Sansa was know. Cat was smart, yes, but she was determined to go back home to her family, her children.

Sansa had family, and friends. But the thought of what should happen should she leave outweighed them all. Even with all the silence, she heard them: the screams.

“And then,” she continued, feeling particularly brave. Or foolish. “As a kindness, you could let me visit my home.” It was foolish indeed, the way she finished with a smile.

Bargaining with a grumkin was never a wise, not when they could unleash a plague with a snap of their fingers. But bargaining with a god?

Sansa was mad.

He stopped their movements entirely, wrapping his hand tightly around hers. It hurt, from the pressure. There was a look in the god’s eyes: excitement, maybe, with a shadow of wariness that Sansa might do the same as her mother.

Slowly, Winter brought his face close to Sansa’s. Close enough that she could make out the individual strands of blue veins circling his eyes. Close enough that she could feel strands of her hair freeze to her cheeks. Close enough that she could taste the frost of his voice as he asked, quiet enough just for her, “Do you love me?”

She looked at him. The god of winter, willing nature to his erratic emotions that not even he knew. In his fury, his desperation, he would cover the world in snows. In his love and adoration, he did the same, only with Sansa’s face etched over every snowflake.

She looked at him. The human body of a god, with its grey eyes flecked with green. Droplets clung to his cheeks where snowflakes had fallen. The spirit lights highlighted his skin, still as pale and icy as ever. His lips cold and blue, and half-open with the question floating between their faces. Do you love me.

She looked at him.

No, I could never love you .

But that wasn’t what the god wanted to hear. He ravaged Highgarden because she ran away, what horrors would be unleash should she tell the truth of her heart? Last she saw, Winterfell was covered in thick snow. How long would they survive if the snows fell as high as the Great Keep? How much would survive?

Winter spun her around suddenly, and Sansa’s vision was a blur of spirit lights and cutting shadows. Snowflakes danced around them, with them. When he caught her, his hands gripped both of her just as tight as before. Desperate for her answer, and dying to hear what he wanted. He was dancing with her like a human might, professing himself like a human might.

Only, the man holding her never could be a human.

Sansa looked into his dark eyes as she said without a flutter to her voice, “Yes. I love you.”
Winter’s body shattered into a millions shards of ice.

Sansa shielded herself from the explosion. Catching her feet before they slipped on the shards of ice beneath her. A rumbling roar echoed in her ears, fading into that even heavier stillness.

She peered through her arms. The spirit lights hung just a little heavier in the air, just a little dimmer. The moon peaked up in the east, casting the highest tips of the weirwood alight in silver. And beneath the tree, Winter looked at the ruined remains of himself. Or so she thought he did – there was nothing but wisps of snowflakes and shivering air.

“ Why!? ” Winter roared, the walls and floors of the palace outside the godswood shook. A torrent of leaves fell all around them.

Sansa lowered her arms. Icicles hung from the sleeves of her cloak. She felt a wind whip through a gash in the forearm, clawing up the sleeve.

Winter grabbed hold of her shoulders with his ghostly fingers. Like the evening by Queenscrown. He was no more a shadow of a thing than he was a human. “ Why did my body break and not yours? ”

“I–!”

She could imagine the coolness in his once-human eyes where they might have been. Winter was angry, yes, furious. Sansa could feel it in the grip he had on her. His frozen touched lanced through her skin. Winter was angry, but he was confused, too. And desperate to prove himself. To Sansa? Or to himself?

Sansa kept her voice as steady as she could. Winter’s icy fingers dug harder into her shoulders. She winced. “I, I don’t know.”

He released her, finding no lies in her words.

“ More... ” Winter stepped away, twirling the silhouette of his body around the shattered corpse of ice. The lake was enshrouded in a thick layer of frost. The roses sat in pieces over its surface. Even the spirit lights – that once danced with them, surrounding their bodies in the soft macabre of death – shied away from the god in his rampage. “ More... Yes, yes, that’s it! I need another body. One that will not break.”

He was talking to the wind, singing the words the children taught him, of how to become a man. There was a hollowness to his voice, like Winter himself was the sound of the hundreds of spirits that hung in the air around them. The lyrics echoed off into the stillness of winter.

Winter approached, trailing cold tendrils across Sansa’s face. She shivered, feeling the ghosts of his human hands on her skin. Hands that were real, skin and blood and bone. A body that was real, made in the image of...someone? Someone Sansa didn’t recognize. But for her. To be with her.

His voice had lowered to a whisper, made harsh by the darkness that shrouded him. “ I shall return soon, my love. And then we shall finish our dance. And you shall love me! ”

And gone.

Sansa watched as snowflakes drifted in the air, resting lightly on the ground. She reached her hand out, feeling the pinpricks of cold. Her body collapsed on the snows. She was too numb to feel the chill of it sneak through her skirts. She watched them melt on her palm.
The beat of the song danced between her ribs: *and love enough to break a heart*.

Winter’s ghostly roar echoed in the godswood. And though Sansa didn’t know the truth of what made a human body shatter, she had an idea why.

*Because I don’t love you.*
Sansa woke up to the crunching of snow.

She hadn’t realized she had fallen asleep. From the dip of the sun, and from the crook in her neck, she’d been out far longer than she intended.

Above her was a swaying cascade of red. Specks of soft blues and yellows and whites poking through as wind whispered through the thick branches, some thicker than even she was. It was a weirwood tree, larger than the ice tree of Winter’s palace. The face overlooked a valley that sat beneath her, the floor too far below to make out through the soft haze. Once, there used to be a lake carved in that valley below, but now all it was was crags of rocks tilted this way and that. Their smoothed faces caught the sun’s rays; a river of sunlight bouncing off the fog, a river as silent as the dead. A blood-red leaf fluttered down, flipping and tilting, landing in Sansa’s lap without a murmur.

It reminded her of Winterfell. Of home.

“What is this you are making?” Winter asked, steps stopping just short of where she sat beneath the tree. With it, the crunching faded away into peaceful stillness. He didn’t bother to sit down beside her.

Sansa gripped the fallen leaf in her fingers, twirling it round and back. Did the gods understand the heavy importance of these sorts of trees? They must have, but in their own way. Like how the dance (to humans) brought upon the changing of seasons, the call to round up crops and livestock and prepare for thankless nights around a fire. The dance (to Winter) was his fleeting moment between him and his Summer.

No wonder he ached for her, if all he had were stolen glimpses and wisps of golden sunlight as they twirled for a single dance beneath a starless sky.

Sansa looked down at the piece of wood in her lap. The birch wasn’t nearly as bone white as the weirwood, rings of black circling it every few hand lengths. Her old stave had been oak, strong and sturdy, but plain, like all the other witches who just started to understand their powers. Nothing at all like Olenna’s stave, with its twisting roses.

The birch started off several feet taller than she was, the straightest branch she could find. Winter had followed her all the while, as well as Arm and Eye (who were positioned on snow-covered rocks out of reach of the weirwood’s massive canopy. Sansa had spied small pawprints in the snow there, foxes or rabbits perhaps, though their presence was smartly hidden from her guards). Winter allowed Sansa the honor of exploring outside of the palace – so long as he accompanied her. A thought that once sat sour in her stomach, until the first day when Sansa was so lost in the endless white and death, she couldn’t make sense of directions. A heavy fog sat in the sky, and everything
was white. Hardly a shadow to point her south. That is, until a massless darkness swept over them, far too big to be a bird soaring above the clouds, and with the wrong number of wings. By sunset, Winter – in his infinite, godly wisdom – blinked them back to the center of his palace, poof, just like that.

The bit of birch was taller than Sansa was, and skinny enough she wouldn’t spend the rest of her days whittling it away. The knife she kept buried in her cloak, along with pouches of herbs and leftover vials, made the process slow; it wasn’t meant for more than chopping leaves or cracking shells with the handle. But it was a good slow, too. It helped the bond, the connection between a witch and her stave. Threads of magic flowed from her fingers into the wood, strengthening it. She flexed her fingers, sore from the cold and from their work. A particularly nasty blister from yesterday was gone. Sansa rubbed over the smoothness, surprised how fast her magic worked up here in the furthest reaches of the world. But there was a new one on her middle finger, and it hurt each time she bent it.

“This?” she responded, lifting the wood. In the bug holes, ice formed, like twisting worms throughout. The ice caught the afternoon sunlight, and suddenly it was a glittering piece of gold and silver against the white. She rather liked it.

“It’s a stave,” Sansa answered finally, looking up at the god. “Similar to the one I had before. Before I–” she bit her lip. Was it wise to bring up the fact that Sansa had threatened her own life with the shattered bit of her old stave? Probably not.

Winter bent down, eye-level with the wood in her hands, staring at it. Marveling at it? It was hard to say. What were human goods to a god? Maybe behind his cool expression, Winter was silently mocking her for such things. “Why?” He lifted a hand, tracing a knot in the center of the stave. The winding creeks of ice responded to his touch. Like springing forth from the last snows at the beginning of a spring, a small, shy rose popped up from the knot. The stem twirled, looking for sunlight, whose rays turned the flower into translucent gold.

“Why what?” Sansa countered. She’d seen a hundred roses – a thousand – swirled in colors she never could have imagined, in patterns and bunches woven by magic. But this was the prettiest of them all.

“Why do...humans make this?

“Not all humans make them. Just some.”

He cocked his head. “I have seen many humans use such things. Especially those close to their last sleep. Are they not for the same purpose?”

“No exactly.” Sansa smiled at his confusion. Because he was trying to understand the customs of his weak, fragile body? Because somehow this was important to his Summer, and he wanted to understand?

Sansa wished she could understand what the god was thinking, feeling, truly.

She continued, “I suppose a lot of older humans use them, yes. But for different reasons than why I am making this one.” Sansa couldn’t dismiss all the older humans, not with the way Old Nan or Olenna handled their staves against all manner of beasts: women heavy with child, crying out loud enough to be heard in villages miles away; stubborn horses or cattle, ploughing through even as their legs bleed and break; horrid creatures of ice and snow, their only mission to kill. Even Winter himself, as Old Nan flung herself at him to save Sansa. (And now look at Sansa. Sitting in his kingdom, beneath a weirwood, talking as if it were any restful afternoon. It should worry her). All of
his curiosity begged the question: how much of human customs *did* the gods know? Winter said he
watched humans, had adopted their habits and patterns – like their speech, their clothes, even the kiss
(Sansa shook her head). But of human traditions? Stories?

Was Winter aware of the tale of him and Summer, forced to endure an endless dance of
touch-and-go? That no matter, the ending was always the same?

That was, until Sansa flung herself blindly into the story.

Sansa remembered he asked a question. “No, not everyone is capable of using them the
same way that we do. Witches, I mean. We–” the facade of Sansa being Summer meant she,
obviously, wasn’t one of *them*. And though she was getting better at this pretense, it was still
difficult to remember. “–they use them to channel their magic. Not as a necessity. But like Old– er, as
I’ve heard them say. Much better to have the stave explode than a hand. Or worse.” A pause. “And I
suppose they make sturdy walking sticks, too, if needed.”

*More importantly, we use our staves to fly away.*

She thought it better not to mention *that*. Sansa could already see it: the room she claimed
as hers barred in ice walls thicker than the gates surrounding Winterfell, immune to any effort of
flames conjured from her hands. Arm and Eye one of tens, or hundreds, of guards keeping eye,
watching her, pulling her down as she slipped onto her stave. Yes, much better not to mention that.

Winter pulled his hand back just enough, hovering over the length. Sansa watched the veins
wriggle beneath his skin. “Humans are so...” he mused, not allowing whatever thought that fluttered
into his mind to pass his lips. *Fragile*, she heard his voice say as they danced between lights under a
tree.

Humans were fragile as they shivered in the cold, blankets too worn and fire too small to do
little of anything. Humans were fragile as they called out for help as the boat rocked to and fro, as the
iceberg slammed into it, filling their lungs with icy water. Humans were fragile as spears of ice
pierced their chests, or as they fell from the highest battlements.

Winter looked up at her then. “...curious.”

Sansa didn’t know what to do, or say, so she replied with a soft smile.

A gentle breeze brushed the blood-red leaves above them aside, as if to let the sunlight shine
directly onto Winter. His new body was the same as the old one. The same cold, pale skin with cold,
blue veins criss-crossing beneath. The same mop of black curls. So dark they absorbed whatever
light fell on them; save for the slivers of ice clinging to them, reflecting the light in brilliant golds and
rubies and sapphires. It took him nearly a week to *make* the new body (or so Sansa thought. It was
hard to say if the days were the same this far north. They were certainly a lot shorter).

And maybe it was a trick of the light, but Sansa thought his eyes stared at her a shade lighter
than before. Subtle flecks of greens amidst the darkness – like Winter tried to take a little bit of
Summer with him wherever he went. Sansa supposed it was good it was green and not blue.

*Those days when Winter was gone Sansa spent alone again, waiting, resting, and waiting
some more. Arm and Eye were as talkative as ever, their stories unfolding into massive tales in her
head. Sansa experimented with the remaining herbs and tonics she had in her cloak. She spent one of
her few days searching for anything *alive* (plant-like or not). There was nothing living, breathing in
this palace of ice and snow save for her.*
And more often than anything, she sang the song to herself. The whole of it, including what she knew were the lines Winter never heard. Or never bothered to understand:

*A man has strength enough to build a home
And time enough to hold a child
And love enough to break a heart*

And Sansa wondered: how much love was needed to love a god?

And Sansa wondered why she let the thought creep its way into her brain.

His attention fell back on the stave in her hands. “Is it...complete?”

Sansa looked at it. Felt the sharp grooves where her knife slipped. The minute bugholes filled with ice that didn’t melt, even after sculpting the wood for hours now. The simple shape of the head, a bulge of untouched bark. Had she been more skilled, might have carved a direwolf. To keep her watch as she explored the kingdom with the god (who never allowed her too far out of her sight. Now, beneath the weirwood, was a welcome thing, even if Arm and Eye were just a quick sprint away).

“I think so,” she said. Weighing it in one hand; not heavy enough to slow her down on foot or in the air. But definitely heavy enough to pack a punch should she be unable to use her magic. Those things, monsters, would be slowed down a second, two. Enough, she hoped, for someone to run away.

Someone who wasn’t her.

“A curious thing,” Winter murmured. “Humans. And all of their…” he waved a hand in front of him, trying to think of words that could capture what exactly he thought of humans. Fragile. Curious. And…? Sansa was sure there was a lot, too much, to be said in words. Winter settled on, “...customs. Traditions. I cannot keep all of them straight in my head.”

She remembered her lie. “Nor I. But, yes, they are very, um, curious creatures.”

Winter smiled, like he always did whenever Sansa alluded to her (fake) godliness. He asked in not-questions about her being Summer, and Sansa replied as vaguely as she could, or with wisps of magic to prove herself. More, she was grateful Winter was willing to suffer the fragility of human bodies for her. Because should he pull her in with whispers of returning to their true forms of light and shadow and creation, well...

Sansa wasn’t sure how she would manage that trick.

“Are you enjoying our kingdom, my sweet? It’s lovely, is it not?” Winter asked, dragging Sansa out of her curious thoughts. He was standing now, slowly spinning around, admiring all of the snow, the faint wind rustling bare branches heavy with white. Somewhere a bird was chirping, quietly, looking for one other friend in all the endless white. Sansa hoped it had a friend. That it wasn’t lost, alone. Its calls cut short, and she hoped she was right.

Sansa didn’t fail to catch the way the god (every time) used our rather than my. “I– Yes. It’s very lovely.” It was, in its own quiet, solitude. Far from the same loveliness that defined Highgarden, or the rolling fields of the Neck, or even the billowing dunes and angry red sunsets of Dorne. It was quite the opposite, the exact opposite. Snow, ice, silence. A sun too tired after a few hours cresting the pale blue above.
“Have you explored much, my love?”

Sansa looked up then, seeing Winter watching her. His dark eyes trailed over the new stave in her lap. If he was afraid what it meant – that Sansa would have a way to channel her magic, or that she would be able to fly away – he didn’t show it. Winter looked nothing but intrigued at this odd human thing. As if Sansa was merely intrigued as a child might be in stories of knights and princesses. A wispy fascination, gone by next season’s fall. “I have. Thank you so much for… trusting me with your– our kingdom.” Above her, the blood-red leaves danced. “It’s beautiful.”

Winter smiled at her, and Sansa couldn’t help but feel a certain sort of mischievousness playing at his gaze. Not the dark sort as he ordered his monstrosities to bring him every red-haired girl in Highgarden (and then summarily toss them aside as if they were nothing). And not even the dark sort of wildness she felt when Winter was merely wisps of wind and snow, a silhouette of the figure standing before her. His look was… soft? Was that something the god was capable of?

“Come with me, my lovely,” he said, and the single rose in her stave shivered.

Winter led her down the hill, past untouched snow-capped rocks littering the knoll. Sansa tried to find the ghost of their footprints up the hill, but the white beneath her was pure, even if it hadn’t been snowing. The wind, maybe. Down, and down, zig-zagging along the cliff from where the weirwood tree stood proud above them. Flakes of snow braved the fall. Sansa, clinging to the wall with one hand and her stave in the other (hoping it was ready enough should she need it) could make out the glistening towers of Winter’s palace through the mist. Hardly an hour’s flight away, less when Winter whisked them home.

They reached a part of the cliff that looked like it had been scooped out by a giant’s spoon, the ceiling above her at least thirty feet away. It stretched as long as the kitchens in Winterfell, save for the clatter of plates and the twinkling of candles above.

What caught Sansa’s eyes were the colors.

Deep greens leading up to pinks and purples and yellows, colors even the evening sky had no hold on. Some flowers she recognized, others she didn’t. There weren’t roses made of petals or ice, but there was a solid tree in the center surrounded by a shallow lake. A copy of Winterfell’s godswood, only this tree stood proudly brown with a crown of spring.

She walked through the rows of flowers, brushing her fingers over them as if all of this – the kingdom, the god, the shrieks that kept her from a restful sleep – was all a fanciful dream. The petals were soft, dewy. They looked to be growing, changing, with each passing heartbeat. Flitting from one color to the next, buds winking open and closed. As though time worked differently, faster.

Sansa felt something tighten in her chest. It hurt, but it was a good sort of hurt.

When she turned to look at Winter, he was already looking at her. Must have been, watching her marvel at this small slice of life so far north. And – yes, it was there, as real as the rows of flowers surrounding her – a softness pushed back the hard lines of his face. Maybe it was the tilt of the setting sun, but even the dark, deep blue of veins running beneath his skin seemed softer, too.

“Do you…” he began, looking around as if he could find the rest of his question floating in the air amidst the spirit lights. “Does this please you, my Summer?”

Sansa looked behind the god, at his kingdom. *It’s mine, too*, she thought, and not for the first time. Though what she was to do with a world of ice and snow, Sansa didn’t know. There were hardly any creatures. Occasionally, Sansa caught sight of a brave bird jumping from branch to
branch looking for its mate, or a squirrel scrounging up what little life there was this far north. And in
the span of a blink, they were gone. Or maybe Sansa was only imagining things other than herself
that were prisoners of snow.

The sun hung above the trees beyond. They had perhaps half an hour until sunset, when the
snow-capped trees caught on fire, swaying like burning liquid in the breeze. Only the sound of trees
groaning as they moved, or the quiet brushing of leaves over their neighbors, accompanied Sansa’s
soft breaths.

Back to Winter. “I...” she began finally. “It’s lovely. Beautiful.” There was more, more to
explain the sudden shock and glee at seeing life. At smelling the sweetness of the flowers, the
velvety feel of them tickling her nose as she bent in. The small tree’s branches twisted this way and
that, and she wondered if maybe it would bear fruit (Winter brought her food, even though he didn’t
eat. But it was (she knew) what he scrounge up from the villages closest to the Wall. To taste a fresh
apple or pear – or a lemon! – would be divine). For all of that, Sansa didn’t know how to voice them.
“Thank you. Truly.”

Winter perked up at that. “I am very glad to hear it.” He reached her, pulling one of her
gloved hands into his and placing a soft kiss to the back of it. Through the thick wool, Sansa felt the
chilly pinprick of his lips.

“And...” she began, staring at the spreading frost on the wool where he kissed her. His
hands were still wrapped around hers. “Of your other promises?”

His brow furrowed, as if to say What else do you need? I’ve let you out of the palace, I’ve
entertained you with silly human food, and I’ve enchanted a garden filled of living things. All of this
just for you.

A part of her felt silly asking niceties from a god. The better part of her didn’t care; look at
all the things he did in the name of love! The horrid storms and worse murders, for the sake of her
being here, trapped in neverending winter. And the last Summer who graced his kingdom... If my
mother stood up to him, she told herself, then so can I.

“Your promise of letting me return to my– to the human world.” Sansa stared into him,
lifting her chin ever so slightly. They were the same height, something that caught her attention in the
bloody rose garden with screams around her. Certainly a god would have chosen a more magnificent
form. Ten feet tall, sparkling, without a single flaw marring perfect skin, and a countenance men and
women would line up to die for. But Winter chose someone so...plain? No, that wasn’t the word. His
body was...human. Even with the inhuman qualities, the deathly pale and cold skin. Winter looked
too human, it frightened her.

The god seemed to admire her courage. “Ah, yes.” He squeezed her hand. “I apologize, my
sweet. I could not bear your loss again, I’ve only just found you.”

Sansa didn’t have more than the sun to count the days, and she figured it had been only a
week or two since she freed Highgarden from its near-demise. Her friends and family would be
worried, but they wouldn’t be stricken to action quite yet. A few more days, a week perhaps, and she
could visit them.

The question was, would Winter let her stay?

“I...” Sansa glanced at the flowers, their colors even sharper against the white. “I have a
certain, um, fondness for humans. For the ones I grew close to. They are curious, yes. But a good
curious. And full of light, and love, and happiness.” That wouldn’t convince him, jealous and
possessive as he was. “Just for a short while. A visit to the human world, to say hello to them, to bring them the warmth and sun they love. And then you can bring me back.”

Winter looked unconvinced. Staring at her, all the softness gone (maybe she only imagined it?). There was proof enough that he was unwilling to let her go. And there was proof enough that should she run, he would destroy Westeros to have her back.

The only time he wouldn’t, would be if Sansa were dead.

She looked over at Arm and Eye, who had followed them, standing on the edge of the cliff. One light shove and they’d go tumbling to the lakebed below. Mother… Sansa thought, not willing to let the idea finish. But it didn’t stop the pieces falling together. The way Old Nan’s voice echoed as she told Silgard to burn the half-eaten knight. The way those things clambered through the gates of Highgarden, hardly human. And then Winter, so sure he’s found Summer again in Sansa.

No. She wouldn’t let that horrid thought plague her.

Winter pulled her hand up for a kiss to her fingertips. The tip of one caught on his lower lip, dragged it down. “Alright. But you must return to me.”

Sansa tried to hide her victorious smile by looking again at the garden. She wished Margaery were here, to help her figure out which flowers were which. To experiment, too. How well would ice roses and hydrangeas mix with living ones? Did fruit from a tree borne in the harshest snows bear fruit as sweet as those from Dorne? She wished again it was a lemon tree. Sansa snuck a look at him through the corner of her eye. A smile tickled his lips. One that – for all of Winter’s watching and learning – did not look entirely human.

Winter glanced behind at the sky, whose pure, pale blue was showing signs of purple and red bruises. Sunsets were sudden in his kingdom, appearing all at once. It was beautiful, no matter how many times Sansa sat atop the icy parapets and watched. “Let us be back,” he said, pulling Sansa into his side with one arm. She let him, as she let him all the other times. Whisking her here and there in his (their) kingdom. But only ever here, in the furthest reaches of the north. Where no other human dared to tread.

They found themselves in the palace’s courtyard in a blink of an eye. Winds and snow whipping around them as they landed. Not for the first time, too, did the resemblance to Winterfell catch her off guard. If Sansa squinted, she could see her father standing on the balcony, looking down at her with a cold curiousness. Or maybe fear. Like the first day she landing on shaking feet off her stave, proud to have done the thing she’d seen her mother do with ease. Sansa giggled with Jeyne and the rest of the witches, too proud of their crooked staves to care they were crooked. She looked up at her father with the biggest smile since Cat fell sick, and Sansa felt the happiness die in her father’s scowl.

“Come with me,” Winter said, offering Sansa his hand. His gaze was up in the sky, at the bruised blue. “There is something else I wish to show you.”

Sansa looked up at the tower they were heading towards. They stood at the base of the Great Keep (or Winter’s Great Keep, too much snow and ice to be Winterfell’s). She spied the window of the room she called hers. And the windows to the rooms that would have been her brothers’ and sister’s back home. Up and up and up, naming them as she’d done before. Higher still. Above them all was the single room she had yet to explore.

Back down to Winter. His head was still tilted at her, unblinking gaze softened. Bare hand hovering in the space between them.
What was up there, was a question that worried at her these past days. A horrid beast of ice and snow, quietly slumbering and ravenously hungry for the taste of human? Or worse: the frozen or maimed or charred body of the last human who he called Summer? Or, somehow, something even worse than that? Something that made Sansa’s breakfast sit uneasily in her stomach.

If there was a thing worse than the nightmares she’d seen in Highgarden – something worse than the way people’s screams carried through the streets and over blood-stained roses – Sansa couldn’t imagine it. She braced herself for it, and gently placed her hand in Winter’s.

He willed the snows beneath their feet to carry them up, deigning not to blink them into that room like he blinked them from the weirwood. Sansa shuddered with fear that she would fall, clutching too tightly to the stave, and to Winter. It was different than flying. She could picture him smiling at her shock.

And then they were there. What she thought were windows were panes of ice, melting as Winter led her into the tower.

The room was lit with spirit lights. With a wave of his hand, Winter sent a swarm of them up to a massive chandelier above, one for each candle, and along sconces embedded in icy marble columns with thick blue veins running through their transparent lengths. The lights twinkled in colors Sansa hadn’t seen them before. At least one for every color of the rainbow. Fading sunlight angled right against the chandelier, and it caught on fire in brilliant ocean blues and plum purples and golden yellows. If she squinted, the spirit lights transformed into fallen stars, captured in a windowless room with a gentle breeze knocking them against one another.

She walked towards in the center in a daze, taking it all in. Far larger than the garden tucked away in the cliff’s face, with just as many colors bouncing off the walls and ceiling and columns. The floor, too, an ice field of roses encircling the center, where the sun and moon kissed. All of it highlighted by the sun’s rays and the spirit lights, Sansa’s body casting a solid shadow over a tangle of roses around her feet.

It was the only room Sansa could not place from anywhere down south. Winterfell had nothing similar, this room far too gaudy for the simplicity of her childhood home. Riverrun she had only been to once – or several times, if Sansa counted the many memories of Winter that slipped into her in dreams. The Eyrie would be the closest, only because of the height, and how far the rest of the palace looked below. Not nearly the same terrifying height looking down at the speck of the Gates of the Moon from atop the Giant’s Lance, or even higher upon her stave. Even then – this room was unique, only to Winter and the ghosts of snow.

She wondered if Winter imagined it. Just for Sansa.

“It’s beautiful…” she trailed off, spinning slowly. Not realizing her feet had carried her to the very center, her staff lying beside one of the columns so far away. At least twenty feet above her was the chandelier, and another twenty feet beyond that a towering dome frosted in swirling snowflakes and whorls. Spirit lights hung in the center of spirals, bobbing up and down and turning the ceiling alive.

Sansa suddenly felt so tiny in the universe.

“Not yet…” Winter trailed off. His voice brought Sansa down from the ceiling, the chandelier, the sparkling colors bouncing and reflecting off the walls, the columns. Down until she felt the solid floor beneath her, felt the breeze winding between the openings rustle her cloak. Down, until she saw Winter standing beside her. Felt the cold of him even as the wind picked up.
“Not...yet...?” Sansa trailed off, too, unsure if she had heard him or not.

He brushed his hands along the sleeves of her cloak. His skin looked even paler against the earthy green than it did over the soft blues he wore (clothes that, even without the soaring falcon, Sansa had a feeling were permanently ‘borrowed’ from the Eyrie. She remembered broken statues covered in snow, the howling of winds between the white stone spires. She shivered). Winter trailed his hands down her arms, leaving growing frost in his wake. It twisted around the fabric, coating Sansa in whorls of snowflakes. Down down until Winter reached her gloves, gently tugging them off one finger at a time. He let them fall to the floor with a quiet thump. Sansa’s hands felt small in his, and cool. His touch wasn’t burning, wasn’t sending her screaming. Not like the first time he touched her. The sun had been setting then, too. Trees heavy with snow, and her heart hammering against her chest. Sansa hadn’t a looking glass, but she knew the faint pink silhouette of his fingers were still scarred on her cheeks.

Sansa watched as Winter trailed his finger along the back of her hands. Like the sleeves, frost exploded from his touch. It didn’t burn, either, but it didn’t melt on her skin. It sat there, stubborn, even as Winter flipped her hands and traced the lines of her palm.

Winter, reluctantly, removed one hand from hers. Pulling something from the pocket of his gown, glinting in the fading sunlight. Sansa gasped when she realized what it was, her own hand flying up to her throat. What had Old Nan said she’s done with it? Thrown it somewhere, way far away, hoping to draw away the god for time enough to solve the story. He found it quickly, and he kept it.

Hand hovering over her throat, Winter stared into her eyes. His thumb brushed over the silver trout. It looked more worn than Sansa remembered. “May I?”

Sansa had a feeling this was more about clasping the pin. And Sansa had a feeling that she knew she shouldn’t be letting the god (of winter and death, she reminded herself) act as gently as he was. Not when he tore the continent apart looking for her. Not when he sunk a ship full of hundreds of innocent souls in an attempt to show his love.

She nodded, the movement as small as she was in the endless kingdom of snow.

Winter’s gaze fell to his fingers as he carefully stabbed her cloak with the pin. The sound of the latch clasping echoed in her ears.

He left his hands on her shoulders as Sansa reached up to touch that bit of silver. It felt...wrong, somehow. Wearing the symbol of her mother – a symbol that Sansa once loved, cherished, hoping to keep Cat’s memory alive, even when her father stared at the pin more than he stared at his daughter. She caressed the familiar shape of the trout, the ring that encircled it, feeling every bump and groove as expected.

Sansa tore her gaze up from her mother’s pin. It felt heavy, cold, against her throat. For lack of knowing what else to do, to say, she let a simple, “Thank you,” escape her lips.

He nodded with a small smile. Reaching out a hand to her. “Would you care for another dance, my sweet?”

Sansa half-wanted to ask him why he loved dancing so much, but wasn’t sure if there was a true explanation to it. Gods didn’t have to make sense. She could see it: Winter’s head cocked in the same way it always was (when he wasn’t looking at her with a smile and a twisted sort of adoration), lips pursed before he said flatly Why not? Or, asking Sansa why humans did any of the things they do.
Because that’s how we are, would be Sansa’s answer. Just as good as his.

He pulled her from her thoughts and into him, their chests touching. Sansa gasped. Winter smiled at that, at the fact that something so simple could surprise her. He leaned his head in towards hers, his cheek brushing against hers as his quiet, cold voice whispered in her ear. “Although, I do think I should do something about our...human attire.”

Sansa wasn’t sure what he meant, a sinking feeling pulling her stomach. He wouldn’t…. Except, she suddenly felt movement, tendrils of wind winding up and down her limbs, around her chest. It chilled her, seeping in deep through her skin to her very bones. His hands were still pressed against her shoulders, unmoving. Only, Sansa felt lighter.

He released her, and Sansa stepped back.

In lieu of her heavy cloak and woolen skirts, was a dress finer than she’d owned, finer than any of the silks imported from Essos. It wasn’t silk and lace and velvet. Frost and stardust. Something so ethereal and inhuman, hugging her arms and chest, and flowing around her waist down to her shins. It was dark blue and pure white, like glittering stars on a moonless night. Wandering snowflakes wrapped around the base of her throat, where her mother’s pin still sat in its worn, shining silver. The frost that once covered her cloak now covered her bare arms, all the way down to her knuckles.

The sun was nearly set, but the spirit lights bounced off the fabric in a constantly shifting prism.

She gaped at it. It was...beautiful. There wasn’t a word better than that. Beautiful was made for this dress of ice and starlight. She twisted her hips, watching the icicles at the hem brush along the top of her boots. She was glad those didn’t transform; gods knew Sansa’s knees were weak already.

“And…” Winter trailed off, snapping his fingers.

And? Sansa wondered. What else could the god gift her today?

In his upturned palms grew a tangle of twigs and leaves and snowflakes, all made of ice. The twisted from one single, large branch, nearly a full circle. The twigs sprouted up, proud and tall, growing in height the closer to the center. Off of them were glistening icicles, line pine needles, or the arms of snowflakes. But far more beautiful than the quiet landscape just outside these walls. And atop the center, tallest spire, was a sun bursting to life. Lights from the spirits bounced off it, too, and Sansa wondered if maybe Winter had waited for the sun to set so he could capture it in that single gem.

A crown of ice.

Oh.

He didn’t place it on her head. Didn’t will it onto her head, either, as he had willed the winds to change her witchery clothes into something more practical for dancing. Standing there, within arms’ reach, was Winter and her crown. Waiting for Sansa to take it. To place it upon her own head.

This was her declaration, she realized. Everything else – the gifts, whether before or after Sansa agreed to go with him here – were things Winter had done for her. The crown itself was a gift, too. But one that would solidify her own affection to the god.

Make your choice, Winter said with his gaze. The softness there was gone, erased perhaps
by a fear that Sansa wouldn’t chose him. That all of his courting, all of the chase, the smiles and the dances – all of it rested whether or not Sansa chose to wear his crown.

She watched the icicles glitter. Stared at the sun. Felt the swirls of galaxies beneath her hands as she worried at the fabric.

Slowly, fingers shaking (not from the cold), Sansa reached out and gripped the crown, gasping as she spied the frost on the backs of her hands. From Winter’s touch, his fingers light and electrifying.

It wasn’t as cold as it looked. Nor was it as cold when she set it atop her head.

The god watched her with an unblinking stare, mouth parted in wonder. And slowly, even slower than the journey the crown took to settle on her auburn curls (it fit snugly, comfortably), Winter’s lips turned into a smile.

Sansa’s chest hurt.

His clothes transformed, too, and Sansa watched as the same frost and starlight that covered her body wrap around his. The sky blue robes lightened into a wintry white, beads of blues and golds swirling around the chest, the arms. Whorls of snowflakes from the coat blended into whorls of ice on his pale skin, the curled icicles in his hair. Blue veins poked through the fine lines of ice. But his eyes – a dark mossy green, so at odds with the rest of him, with the rest of his kingdom.

Winter, too, willed ice to circle around his head, jutting up in seven delicate points, each a different height. At the center of the tallest one sat a moon, silver rays springing forth from its center. His crown matched hers.

Or, she matched him.

“So, almost.” Winter’s voice was quiet, more a thought to himself. Sansa wasn’t sure what he meant, but he gave her no time to question him. Winter offered her his hand again, his lips still pulled up at the corners. “Now, my lovely Summer, shall we dance?”

The spirit lights shuffled away as Winter led Sansa to the center of the room. Taking her hand and waist once they stood above the kiss: the sun and the moon. Summer and Winter.

He stepped forward, and Sansa followed. Across the floor and beneath the sparkling chandelier, they danced. Sansa saw the black silhouettes of the mountains to the west against the dark sky. She saw the dark waves far to the east beneath glittering stars. She saw the cut of the Wall, so far away, it might as well have been ten feet tall. She saw endless fields of darkness to the north, lit by the stars, and somewhere there was a low, quiet howl. Not like a wolf or bear; far from it.

It was a moonless night tonight, too.

Wind played their song, whistling around them as they spun and twirled between the galaxies above and below them. There was a quiet murmur, too. A song, a true song, spoken without words but whose tone set Sansa’s heart aching for a home and life she never knew. She wondered if it was the spirits singing to them, as they bobbed into them, as they watched from the chandelier. Their low, hollow song filled with the melancholy of lives long forgotten.

Winter spun her out, a sweeping motion that had the skirts of her dress billowing out around her feet. Their bodies knocked into spirit lights, gently bobbing through the air like pinecones on water.
Neither of them spoke this time, allowing the dance to speak for them. Allowing the glittering of their clothes, their crowns, to say more than any words.

Winter pulled her back, wrapping his other arm around her until she was trapped. Sansa’s smile faded away with the closeness of his lips to hers. With the hard stare of his eyes, so close Sansa could see there were small, tiny flecks of blues among the greens. So close Sansa could see the threads of blue veins beneath his cheeks. She felt pinpricks of cold breech the short gap between their faces. Caressing her cheeks, almost, cooling off the heat that was filling her more than the exertion of another dance.

Then he untwisted their bodies, letting go of her hands as he bowed. Sansa, in her shocked confusion, followed with a curtsey, gathering the stars and universe in her hands.

Their dance ended.

They stared at each other. Sansa willed her breathes to slow down, noticing that – like blinking – breathing wasn’t something the god did. He was three steps away. Between them, watching from below, the sun and moon kissed.

The room and Winter was cast in sharp greens and blues. Sansa stared out the edge of the room, finding something else that took away her breath.

“Oh!”

She walked up to the edge of the hall, steps shorter the closer to the edge she got. There were no railings, no windows, and though Winter could control the snows and ice to catch her, she wasn't sure he was that fast. She spied her birchwood stave lying beside a column, seemingly forgotten in the declaration and the dance.

One palm against the veined marble, sending a chill up her arm. Wrapping around it until she was hugging the column, shivering against it. But Sansa didn’t care about the cold right now, or the ice that circled her head.

Outside of the palace, just beyond her reach Sansa thought she could reach out and weave her fingers through them, danced a myriad of lights. Greens and blues, yes, and higher above purples, and higher still were pinks fading to pale white. Like rivers of light, twisting this way and that, never content with their path. The world below transformed into something so unlike the reality, or even her dreams.

The hungry wolf’s fire. Or so the Northerners called it. Blazing and burning the night sky, like the king centuries ago who slew the Andal invaders. A northern wolf who could breathe fire. And who kept the monsters the Andals armed with at bay. Winterfell slept in peaceful winter for many long years.

Sansa saw them from Winterfell, brilliant colors peeking over the trees and the Wall. Last time he was home, Robb told Sansa how different they looked standing atop the Wall. How they turned the world into a painting no human could ever dream of. He swore he saw the wolf in the night sky, breathing its fire. Robb promised to take her to the Wall to see them one day, assuming she hadn't flown there first.

Sansa never realized how little of it they saw, even atop the Wall.

“No.”

Sansa looked over her shoulder, expecting to find Winter where she left him in the center of
the room. Except he was there, hardly a foot behind her, one hand gently hovering over the small of her back for support. He wasn’t looking at the dancing lights – that now swayed this way and that in brilliant teals and magentas, like waves of an unearthly sea suspended in air.

Winter’s gaze was on her.

Sansa licked her lips, trying to fend off the creeping warmth in her cheeks. The chilling column didn’t feel so cold anymore. “Now what?” This was the second time he said it, waving it away with words or dances.

He closed the gap, his fingers sending hot bursts of ice through the dress across her back. Sansa startled, twirling around the column so she was facing him now, one arm still holding on for support. She was too aware of the drop behind her.

The lights played off of Winter’s eyes, the ice that swirled over his skin. Now he looked the god, ephemeral and impossible to contain in a human body. He was as mysterious and as wonderful as the whole of the kingdom, as the lights that played in the moonless sky above her. Winter’s voice cut through the beating of her heart: “Now it’s beautiful. Perfect.”

She looked down at herself, trying her best to ignore how the light press of his fingers on her back had felt, or the way she felt her cheeks warming as he pressed her against him despite the chilly breeze weaving through the open columns. There was no denying what the dress, the crown, all of it meant.

A queen of ice. His queen.

It should make her queasy. The

Only, Sansa couldn’t keep her hands from twisting in the sheer snowflakes covering her. The dress was beautiful.

Winter thought she was beautiful.

Carefully, cautiously, he lifted his hand up to his chest. A large whorl of gold and silver sat where his heart might have been, if he wasn’t a god. His gaze focused on the small bit of empty space between them.

“Is this—” Winter twisting his fingers in the fabric of his robes, staring off into the distance with an unblinking gaze. As if he was listening for something. The wind was still there, soft, whispering against Sansa’s arms and legs, playing with her unbound hair. The spirit lights – now that she noticed it – sang their sorrows. But Winter looked to be listening to something else. “Is it supposed to...hurt?”

His heart?

When she didn’t reply, Winter gripped her free wrist lightly, placing her hand over his chest and covering it with both of his hands. She felt the coldness of his skin.

And she felt it: a small, quiet ba-dump.

Sansa gasped. The god had a heart – or something similar enough – and it was beating because of her.

“I...” she began, trying to make sense of what any of this meant. Him, the dance, the crown, the mimicked beating in her own chest.
“I want…” Winter began, staring at her with his unblinking gaze. He dragged his tongue over his pale lips.

“Do you…” Sansa began. Nerves had her licking her lips. Nerves that fluttered faster when she caught Winter's gaze following the trail of her tongue. “Do you want to kiss me?”

It didn’t matter which one of them leaned in first, she told herself, eyes closed. It didn’t matter.

It also didn’t matter that the lips that pressed against hers were warm.

One of Winter’s hands kept hers placed over his chest. The other crept up her jaw, fingers tangling in the hair around her ears. He pulled her closer into him.

Sansa let him.

She let go of the column, wanted to tangle her own fingers in his hair, too. It was soft, at contrast with the crown and the ice. Sansa pushed his head into hers, their lips crushed.

Winter turned her, pressing her against the column she had been clutching to for dear life. The drop was just to her left foot; Sansa could feel the wind climbing up the tower, weaving between the skirts that were pinned against Winter’s leg. She didn’t notice that, either. The fact that Winter’s body was so close against her, cold and hard and curious about his beating heart.

She felt it. Beneath her hand and his hand, pinned between their bodies. Even with her own, frantic and thrumming. Sansa felt the god’s heart.

Beating.

Beating.

For her.

A horn bellowed, echoed through the army of trees

The soft, mossy green in Winter's eyes transformed to black. Beneath her hands, beneath his hands, Sansa’s skin shivered.

Above them, the hungry wolf roared. Gone were the soft blues and greens. A purple so wine dark and bruising, pink lining the edges. And the spirit lights – once soft yellow – burned into an angry bright blue.

Winter strode to the other side of the room, leaning over the edge without a care to hold onto the column. Sansa followed him to the south side of the hall, afraid for the truth she would see there. One hand found solace over her mother's pin, the chill it sent through her fingers. Her other hand steadying her shaking legs against a column as she looked across the palace.

It was hard to count them, a massive, massless shape of black and brown, barely moving beneath the dancing wolf’s fire. They blended into the landscape, a cutting square shadow against hills and trees dropping with snow.

Slowly, like standing on the shore and staring at waves far off the coast, just at the sharp line of the horizon, Sansa watched them march towards the palace. A day away, maybe two.

“I won’t let them take my Summer away,” Winter said against a wind that was lashing
through the hall, whipping their clothes against them in sharp outlines. Sansa held tighter to the column, taking a single step back for fear of falling.

Winter, without looking at her, placed his own over hers, the quiet fury seeping through his human body. It was cold, colder than the chill that began winding its way up Sansa’s spine. Colder than the press of his fingers all those weeks ago, his body nothing more than the assumption of a human. Colder than his unbeating heart had been for centuries, millennia. She saw the muscles of his jaw tighten, the un-pulsing vein in his neck protruding from ice white skin.

He turned then, staring at her with a darkness so deep not even the lights penetrated them. “Not again, my sweet.” The hand on hers pressed harder. “I shall not lose you again.”

That wasn’t Sansa’s concern. Because she didn’t have to know whose silhouette of an army marched through the throng of trees.

She already knew their banners had proud direwolves leaping on an endless field of ivory and grey.

Looking for her.
This cold and snow wasn't natural, Ned knew.

The crunching of it beneath his boots – and the boots of the army he brought along, and the horses slow clop-clop-clop, and the constant roll of carts’ wheels – drowned his thoughts with each step. Good, because he didn’t want to think. Not about what he had to do when they finally reached their destination. Not about the uncertainty that would meet them there. Too long had that shadowy, massless form hung over the Lord of Winterfell’s head. Too long had Ned sat in the great hall, in his solar, waiting for the doors to fling open with shouts of It’s her! It’s Sansa! M’lord, we’ve found her!

The dreams were worse, expanding on the wisps of shadows he didn’t entertain while awake. Of Sansa hobbling through the cold forests, her witch’s stave barely a broken shard of wood, her magic all but depleted. Fending off wolves of fur and ice. Struggling to find scraps of berries that hadn’t felt summer’s warmth in years. The watchers would shout in the great hall It’s her! only to have hunters bring forth a corpse whiter than the snows that clung to her blue lips. Only to have hunters offer Ned a roaring torch.

Not again.

Ned fisted his left hand in his cloak, feeling his glove scrape against the bits of fur that froze over. The elixir was cold and bitter; stranger’s eyes weren’t known for their sweetness.

Winter is coming rang the motto of his house. For years, for centuries, the wolves promised a future as bleak as what they were living. Endless fields of white, a sky ceaseless with snow, a land craving for a single ray of sunlight to melt it all away.

Winter was here, for certain. Ned only wished he could drive it away.

“Ahead of us, m’lord.”
Ned pulled himself back into the harsh, bitter cold of reality. He felt a fine dusting of snow on his cloak, on whatever slivers of his face poked through the hood. The men walking beside him were pointing ahead through a cut in massive trees. He didn’t have to look at them to know they would much rather be anywhere else but in the frozen wasteland beyond the Wall.

The Wall…

Ned couldn’t believe that, either. Thousands of years it stood, protecting humanity from the aberrations that existed beyond, some so horrible the stories wouldn’t dare describe them. Nightmares – not stories, but nightmares – so horrible they didn’t do justice to what they looked and sounded like in icy flesh.

A crack, large enough for an army to walk through, unhindered and three abreast. Or, for one large thing to crawl between the shattered ice.

Ahead of them, standing proud against a starless sky, was the god’s seat. Bigger than Winterfell and made entirely of sparkling ice, catching the shifting lights above, like it was an illusion. Maybe it was; Ned had so desperately wanted to find it, and he had lost his faith in the gods when one of them stole his daughter. She’d hidden it from him, the truth. She and Old Nan, speaking on it when Ned was away or too hopeful that they were merely talking of common witch things. Hushed words, until it was too late for Ned to do anything about it. He remembered the cool sadness in the old witch’s face when she entered his solar, her knuckles white around her stave. He remembered the coldness that sucked away his beating heart as he listened, patiently impatient, wanting to scream.

Not again.

Just staring at that monstrosity of ice ahead, Ned felt his blood boil in his veins despite the cold.

“M’lord?”

He blinked down to the knight’s face. Human, good. An army of humans reaching far back through the woods. Scant torches lit up their hoods, their faces lost to the shadows. But human, all of them.

Ned nodded at the knight. Rodrick, that was his name. He had a family waiting for him back at Hornwood. Ned prayed to his gods that Rodrick would see them again. Ned turned to see the rest of the army – from Winterfell, from the holds in the North, and even a band of black brothers itching for a fight. They were slowing down to a halt, stretching their arms and legs, stomping feet to keep from frostbite. It was a long march from the Wall, not to mention the many miles from Winterfell. Men attended to the horses, breathing hot air in the chill.

Back to Rodrick. To the castle made of ice. “It seems Old Nan was right this time.”

Rodrick nodded, as did the few other knights within earshot. They would swear they weren’t listening. “Seems that way, m’lord.”

He was waiting for Ned. It was no more than two day’s march, had they not had the blessing of the witches with them. From Winterfell to here would have been a month, at the least. But their magic sped them up, doing something Old Nan had described as moving bodies through the fabric of the world. Magic was a much easier explanation. So, not a day or two’s march, but an hour.
Ned replied without looking at the other man. “We will continue, before dawn. In the middle of the night. If we catch them in the darkness, maybe…”

*Maybe we won’t fail.*

To the left was a lake, frozen solid. Or perhaps, never once unfrozen, in the thousands of years the world existed. Rocks jutted from the surface, one larger than the rest, poking up from the ice in a black silhouette not unlike an animal’s claw. Beyond that, a quarter of a mile above the surface, was the top of a frozen waterfall. It stood just above the tops of the trees. Ned looked between it, and the palace, before finally remembering Rodrick beside him.

There was another question just inside Rodrick’s lips, Ned knew. One that Ned didn’t want to admit to himself, either.

*What if your daughter is dead?*

Worse: what if his daughter had fallen for the god. Something his lovely Cat hadn’t done, thank the gods. Her sister had, and Ned couldn’t count the number of times he wished Lysa hadn’t shown up at Winterfell’s gates that evening with her wild fantasies. She came with news of the child in her stomach, on the heels of Jon Arryn’s passing. Ned thought nothing else of Lysa’s appearance other than a good show to see her sister, and he left them to catch up.

*What if I didn’t.*

Ned hadn’t been expecting the pounding on his bedchamber past midnight. The frantic sobs tinged with as much anger as fear. *He took her!* Lysa shouted, waking half the castle. *He took her, and not me!*

There were a lot of things Ned wished he could change. There were a lot of things Ned knew he had to change. Now, before things got too worse. Before he was left standing with nothing but a torch and tears.

“A short rest,” Ned said finally. Rodrick nodded, obedient, even if the tiredness was wearing down on him. On all of them. The knight went to go tell others, who would in turn tell others, until the whole of the army had time for just enough sleep to rest their legs. There wasn’t enough warming tonic for all the army, despite the witches’ best efforts, and there wasn’t safety in lighting fires to stave off the chill. To stave off unsavory things lurking in the shadows of trees beyond, yes. Ned tried not to find the eyes assuredly staring at them in the darkness.

Ned looked up through the trees again, staring at that horrid thing of ice as it glinted shades of blue and green and purple, like the agitated surface of a water at sunset. The hungry wolf’s fire. An omen, and good for him, Ned thought. The wolf would surely spew its flames and melt that icy monstrosity along with the god inside it.

He clenched his gloved hand over the pommel of his sword, until he could feel the shape of it through the leather. Ned knew he should look away – there was nothing good stewing in his head or heart staring at it – but he couldn’t. So close; they were so close.

If he reached with his free hand, Ned could crush the tallest spire between his fingers. Trail his hand down the length of it until the castle was nothing but glinting icicles of rubble.

“Come, Rodrick,” Ned said, gripping at the furs at his throat. It was colder above the Wall, too cold. He pointed with a nod of his chin as the other man did the same wrapping his cloak tightly. “The top of that waterfall has an unobstructed view of the castle and the surrounding land.”
Rodrick nodded. His words left snaking trails of white in the air between them. “Should we bring anyone else, m’lord?”

Ned shook his head. “Best to leave the men here.” In case our plan falls apart. “It won’t be a long walk. There and back before midnight.”

Rodrick nodded, though he looked wary. Another question pulling his lips.

“Speak, ser. What is it?”

The knight looked offended – at himself, that his obviousness was spotted. “M’lord. I just, well. Could we get one of the witches to come with us? Make our walk, er, shorter?”

Ned shook his head. “We need them rested.” He was adamant about not using their magic these past few days. His men were kind enough to keep their protests away from his ears, but Ned knew. Still, despite the chill that was seeping through all of the men’s boots – and despite the ache in their legs as the cold urged them to sit down, lie down, close their eyes just a moment – it was imperative the witches were at their fullest strength. Because those things… After what happened first at Highgarden, then Harrenhal, Moat Cailin, Winterfell, Ned knew they were their best asset to keeping all of them alive.

Ned shook his head again, offering the knight a smile, glad for the hood and darkness to hide the falseness in it. “It’s not a long walk, Ser Rodrick. I’m sure you’ve fared worse.”

Rodrick nodded, doing a better job keeping his doubts hidden. Better, but not best. “Of course, m’lord. Lead the way.”

Ned looked up again at the shifting colors of the hungry wolf. Prayed for...well, anything good. Prayed that he was right in hoping the wolf’s presence would bring his men luck in the battlefield. Prayed that should things go south, the witches in his company would be able to get as many men out alive.

But most importantly, Eddard Stark prayed that his daughter was safe. Alive.

Because by the gods, it won't be taking another.

* * *

Sansa’s heart hammered, not least because of the dance or the kiss. The words echoed in her head, each word whipping against her skin as the wind did to her hair: I won’t let them take my Summer away.

My.

My.

My.

Sansa didn’t have to turn to know Winter was looking at her. His hand didn’t let move from cupping hers over the column, and Sansa couldn’t say which was colder: his skin, or the marble. There wasn’t a trace of warmth, a trace of a beating through those thin blue lines criss-crossing pale flesh. As though the last weeks – the last minutes, ending with simultaneously the softest and hungriest kiss – never happened.

He was the god that shaped each snowflake into her likeness. The god that sent her roses,
urging the ground to spring them forth wherever she stepped. The god that brought her flowers and trees and set them to life in the midst of the harshet snows. For her.

But this god standing next to her now was the same that tormented the North in ceaseless snows searching for her. The same god that smashed a glacier into a ship of innocent people because he could. The same god that unleashed his horrors upon Highgarden without caring who died or why. For her.

It shocked Sansa, the coldness, this sudden change. But it shouldn’t have. The fleeting humanity should have shocked her instead. The fact that after millenia – alone, watching the world from his palace in the furthest reaches of ice and snow – that a god as old and powerful as him had something stewing deep in his chest that might be confused for love. The gods couldn’t love. They couldn’t feel, like humans.

He wasn’t human, she reminded herself.

Winter urged her with his fingers, veins dancing beneath skin, willing Sansa to look at him. But she only looked ahead. The army wasn’t a black massless wave marching towards them. They stood still beneath the shadows of the trees, blending in if not for the sparse torchlight twinkling through the thick canopy of leaves. Waiting, she knew, for the opportune moment to strike.

A day, maybe two. She could work with that. She had to, anyways.

The problem was, she wasn’t sure how. How was she meant to appease both the god and her father, knowing they both wanted the same thing. Her. Winter wouldn’t stop again until Sansa committed her future (as fleeting as it was compared to a god’s) to him, trapped here in his kingdom with only the dead for companions. And her father wouldn’t stop until Sansa was home, in Winterfell, heavy furs and a warm drink in her hand, without any silly notions of loving a god.

Sansa wondered what her mother would have done.

And realized just as quickly she did know. Catelyn left as soon as she could, braving the harsh snows and the unknown monsters in the miles between here and the Wall. She never made it, but she tried.

And Sansa? She told herself she was trying – that’s why she carved a new stave, that’s why she made a bargain to visit below the Wall. But deep down, in the deepest parts where the unsavory thoughts lay waiting, Sansa knew. Something else was keeping her tethered to the palace, to the endless fields of white that sparkled silver in the morning sun and gold in the evening.

A day. Yes, she could think of something in that time. She had to.

Besides, if the god loved her – truly loved her – he would do as she asked. He’d done it before.

Sansa maneuvered her hand between his and the column, lacing her warm fingers with his frozen ones. Her skin was turning purple and blue, and she couldn’t feel the pads of her fingertips pressing against him. “Please,” she began, licking the specks of frost from her lips. She brought her gaze around to look at him, and the unblinking darkness that met her was disconcerting. “Please, leave him be. He – the human down there – won’t do anything rash, not if you’ll allow me to talk with him. He won’t steal me away.”

Winter lightly squeezed her hand. The ghost of a smile on his mouth, so at odds with the dark fury brewing in his eyes. This close, she could see the faint specks of the spirit lights bouncing
off the black. A starry night, quiet, but full of rage. “He will, my love. He has.”

Sansa did her best to hide her surprise. She thought her mother had ran away, not her father running north to save her. Except, maybe they were both true. Catelyn running to the Wall to be home, and Eddard running to it to bring his wife back.

A wintry illness. The lie that her father said to spare his children from the truth.

A sickness so dire, Sansa never saw her mother again after Winter stole her away. And her father was never the same man, not when he returned from searching (for herbs for medicines that Old Nan required to make Catelyn better. Only, now Sansa knew better. The witch had known, about Cat and Lysa, about Winter). Ned Stark had been searching for his wife.

If he found her, he never said so.

“Why,” she began, looking at their clasped hands. It was a foolish question that tickled her lips, but one she had since the beginning of their acquaintance. “Why do you love me?”

“Why?” He sounded incredulous.

Sansa nodded. “Why do you need to love, when you have—she gestured to the world outside the palace, covered in snow and gleaming in the end of the wolf’s fire,—all of this. Why do you need me?”

His free hand reached for her chin, pulling her face and her gaze unto him. Darkness met her, the same darkness, but colder. Quieter. He was...looking, for something, for the same something, in her own eyes. Sansa wondered if he found it there, because his voice was slow, sad. “To be a god is so lonely, my sweet.”

Sansa didn't know what to say at the honesty. She didn’t expect it from him. She didn’t expect it to tug something at her chest.

“Stay, my love.” Winter’s hand moved from her chin to grip around her wrist, a light touch, but Sansa knew it was an effort for him. There wasn’t a speck of light left in those eyes that once looked at her with fondness not ten, five minutes ago. There wasn’t even the thrumming ghost of a heartbeat where he touched her, his skin painfully cold against hers. The skin around her wrist was shifting into purple, too. “There is nothing to be done to reason with humans, stubborn in their ways as they are. I shall go and deal with—”

“Don’t kill them!” was the first thought that fell from her lips. Because Sansa knew without knowing that her father was there amongst the throng of knights marching towards the palace. A glance outside – how fast had they been traveling to be just a day or two away, when the fields were empty before Winter spun her through the dance? – and back to Winter. “Please.”

The god’s grip tightened, just a fraction. Sansa felt her blood freezing. “They shan’t stop otherwise, my love.” He said it as if it were the most obvious solution in the world. Sansa knew it should bother her, and it did. Only, something else bothered her more. His fingers were frigid around her wrist.

“Don’t,” she repeated, uncertain if she could change his mind again. It was easier with the prospect of forever looming before them. A forever field of snow-capped trees and frozen lakes. A forever alcove of freshly-planted lemon trees and roses bursting with color. A forever of just Winter and Summer, their bodies and hearts intertwined.

Now? Sansa couldn’t say where her heart lay. With the god who stole her away, or with her
father who planned to steal her back.

There was, of course, a third option. The one that failed the previous Summer who was swept away into this palace of ice. But — and it was a heavy but, filled with as much dread and uncertainty as any of the other options — it had worked the last time.

Winter did stop his rampage in Highgarden.

Sansa glanced down, down, all the way to the snowy floor below, a look long enough to regret it. She tried not to remember how high above they were, or imagine how quickly she could cover that distance. She did, instead, hold firm to her threat. A pity Sansa didn’t have a jagged bit of wood to make good on it. All she could do was take a large-enough (but cautious-enough) step closer towards the edge, half of her boot standing on air.

Sansa took in a deep breath, feeling the cold rippling off Winter soak straight through her lungs, past them, until his aura chilled her very soul. “If you don’t cease, if you don’t let me reason with my— with the humans down below, I will throw myself off this tower.”

Winter — this time — looked amused, not horrified as she’d been expecting. His hand gripped so tight it hurt, as if he was moments from yanking her back to the safety of the chamber, to the safety of his embrace. He twisted his way, blocking her assumed path towards death. “You did, my sweet. Die, the last time I brought you here. But you came back.”

He seemed...sure of himself, that she was bluffing. Maybe she was, she hadn’t decided. “And who’s to say I won’t do it again?” Another side-step. She shook loose his grip, the sudden loss of cold sending her blood shooting up into her fingers in a tingling cascade. “I can. I will.”

“Ah, but you won’t.”

Another step. They were circling the room at this point. “I will.”

Winter tsked at her. “You will not die, in the sense a wolf or a human dies. The fragile human body of yours might. But you — Summer — cannot.” Another step towards her, corralling Sansa towards the center. “But if you are so certain what you want… There is only one way your body cannot be mine if you do find death more appealing.”

Old Nan’s voice — stern and wary; afraid, even if the old witch would never admit it — whispered through Sansa’s head: burn this thing. The half-eaten body was too frozen it hardly smelled as they stood there, watching flames licking up to the sky.

Is that what he means, she wondered. And worse, wondering: Did my mother…?

Sansa couldn’t bring the thought to completion.

The ground beneath her shook, enough to bring Sansa back to reality. She was glad of it — much better than the horrid thoughts threatening to break her facade. She saw it in the jitter of the night sky behind Winter. Still she didn’t look away, afraid what the god might do should Sansa show an inkling of fear, of uncertainty. Gods knew how heavy her stomach felt full of it.

“I’ve died once,” she began, raising her voice enough to counteract the uncertainty she felt. “It would be easier the second time.”

Winter stared at her, and he looked...amused?

Limbs grabbed hold of Sansa’s arms, pulling her back.
“Let me go!” she screamed into the howling air. She’d forgotten about them, Arm and Eye, her guards. They were nothing but bones and ice, but their three limbs held fast to her. Sansa regretted not looking when the rumbling began: the open sky between columns was filling in with ice, spreading out like ivy, until not the faintest breeze snuck inside to ruffle her skirts.

Trapped.

“I did that, too,” Winter began, standing and watching her struggle. Amused, yes, that definitely was the expression he wore. It soured with the pitch-darkness of his eyes, the growing tendrils of ice in his hair as though the crown he wore was seeping cold onto him. “Let you go. Once, not very long ago. And you, my sweet, repaid me with a death most unkind.”

Sansa fought, kicking and elbowing whatever she could hit, but Arm and Eye didn’t care. They were dead already. Her fighting only made their grip tighter.

Winter leaned in and place a small kiss to her forehead. He left himself there, and against the bright blue of the spirit lights, Sansa could see each of the individual veins running up and down his neck. His breath tickled her skin as he spoke, “And I promised never to let you go again. Not ever.”

Winter ran his hands down her arms, the frost of her dress properly chilling her skin. When he reached her hands, he clamped hers around his, as Sansa’s mother had done when she was small. Warming up her skin with her own. Only, there wasn’t warmth to Winter. The jolt tickling down her spine started where his hands held hers.

He admired the backs of her hands. Sansa saw it, too. Faint against her pale skin were even fainter lines – not like veins, more like the spreading frost across a windowpane just before the snows properly fall and stick to the glass. The mirror of them bloomed across her cheek where Winter had first touched her by the Queenscrown. Sansa couldn’t see herself, but she wondered if like the blue veins beneath his skin, she looked the same.

“Don’t kill them,” she whispered, her voice straining. She fought against the bubbling tears in her eyes, half frustration and half fear. It was a lost cause, what with Eye’s grip growing tighter as Sansa tried her best to slowly inch forward. Arm (even with one missing) held fast. “Please. I will be yours, forever, I promise. Just please don’t kill them. They don’t need to die.”

“They shan’t die,” Winter replied. “Not...forever.”

Sansa shivered; at the god’s words, at the momentary flicker of a smile.

He let go of her hands then, the ghost of his cold touch tracing the swirls across her skin. “I shall return, my love.” His voice was quiet, but it rumbled off the walls of the palace and the walls of her chest. Quick steps towards the center of the room. Bits of him fading in snowy wisps with each step. “And then, you and I shall rule forever.”

“But-!” Sansa pulled forward. Arm’s and Eye’s grip on her was firm despite her struggling. The walls were as thick as the columns now, devoid of blue veins and reflecting the spirit lights like she was caught in the center of a night sky. Sansa saw herself, too, twenty Sansas all staring back at her. Each with a face as defeated as she felt. “Don’t-! Please-!”

An empty plea unfinished. Winter was gone in a flurry of wind and snow. Leaving Sansa with nothing of him but an icy crown falling, shattering against the floor.

* * *

Winter appeared in the chest of a human, feeling the warmth of organs expanding and
exploding into a thousand fragments. They splattered the snow in bright specks of red, glittering stars of blood upon a fresh white sky. So beautiful. Unlike the god, the humans couldn’t reform themselves, obvious by the fact the chilled bits of bone and meat sat unmoving against the white. Winter appreciated that wiry human for teaching him that. He wondered if she was here, if perhaps her trick would work against her.

The human had screamed, a sound echoing throughout Winter’s hollow chest as he stood in the field of men. In shock, they cowered away, steps fumbling over each other. Dawn was nearly upon them, and in the dimness lit by few torches Winter saw it: fear.

Oh, what a lovely sight!

A few braver than others gathered their weapons from the ground or from against trees, fumbling to unsheathe them. Winter wondered why they bothered. To think a pathetic human had any chance in stopping him? To end a god required more than steel and a foolish bit of courage. A god’s heart sat far, far away from the reaches of mortals.

Or so Winter told himself.

Winter spun to look at them all, assessing this paltry army brought against him. A few hundred, he guessed. And among them all: a human hells-bent on taking him down. Winter could picture that face, the heavy grey gaze burning into his own. He was a brave human, Winter conceded. But as foolish as all the rest.

Summer’s frightened face slashed through his vision. Her quiet but stern Don’t. Her loud but broken Please.

“Leave.” He heard his voice bounce off the trees surrounding them. Oh, how wasteful this was, Winter knew. Much easier, much quicker, to slaughter them, paint the snows red in honor of his love’s hair. Don’t rang Summer’s sweet voice, her lovely lips half-open and catching errant snowflakes. Had Winter brought the snow with them into the ballroom? He couldn’t remember. None of it was as important as the sight of his beautiful half, shimmering in a dress made of starlight. And the crown he wrought for her! How perfect it sat upon her hair of dusk.

Animals in the distance – horses, mostly, heavy with human-craft, and a few dogs – howled and whined at the clanging sounds of cries and horns and shouts. Some of them ran. Smart creatures.

The humans, however, weren’t.

They said nothing in response, those few that had grabbed hold of steel. Replying by way of slamming weapons against Winter’s body. It was made of iron and lead and gold – all of the things that made a man – and though some of himself and his robes sloughed off into the snow, the steel was useless. It rattled a piercing shriek against the growing ice of Winter’s skin.

He tilted his head at them. They moved back, one step then two, arms lowering.

Winter was growing bored with all the Don’t. With all the Please: he saw it in their eyes, even as they readied their steel to strike again.

The last time his Summer pleaded not to kill, Winter obliged as best he could without lying. She didn’t have to know the truth of his reach, as far as the barren deserts to the south; Winter found them much prettier blanketed in white. Besides, Summer needn’t leave her perch in his palace. He would give her anything and everything she needed.

This time, Winter’s patience was worn thin. The fear – fear! what a horrid human thing, it
twisted his chest, growing slivers of darkness gnawing at him from within, a scratch he couldn’t itch – grew with each passing, wasted second. Summer would escape! Summer would leave him again! Go go go, his mind was yelling at him. Go! Because if he didn’t, half his very being gone in the blink of an eye, and for what? For not ridding the world of these pests? He and his love were gods! He and his love existed far beyond whatever palty imaginations humans had.

Oh, if they knew the sorts of things that sat slumbering beneath their houses of wood and stone. The sorts of things that once roamed the lands, and would again when humans faded away. A god was the least of their worries.

Another human found courage and strength to swing a weapon. Winter dodged it, shoving the human aside with a foot as he stumbled onto the snow. Someone – many someones – were yelling Why is the lord not back yet! ; screaming about That thing is here! ; crying for the witches, please gods, it’s here!

Enough.

Winter slammed his hands into the frozen ground, letting the cold of the earth wrap around his fingers. Ice looped up his arms in a welcoming embrace. Oh, how the earth below craved for his frozen touch, Winter knew. The earth never had been satisfied with half a year of cold and snow. It was only right to answer the call, to let his being stretch out towards the furthest reaches of the land. Across it, the oceans separating the world in half. Beneath it, where things dead began to stir again.

The yelling and the screaming and the crying coalesced when his own army emerged from the snow.

He felt the ice crawling up his arms, across his chest beneath the glittering robes that he weaved to match his queen’s. A pity they were torn, but it was no matter. A hundred new gowns for him and his Summer, to go with a hundred new crowns, a hundred new castles, a hundred endless forevers. Just him and Summer.

He laughed as the screaming rose: from humans, fear and shock; from his own creatures, enjoying the freedom and the sport of slaughter. His laugh was a frigid sort of roar that might have been a Yes! had he listened to his voice. Or if he was still inhabiting that weak human body. No uncertainty now, when the world obeyed him as it should! No pains in his chest or a flurry in his stomach. Only ice and cold, only the limits of his imagination.

And Winter had been around for a long time. There was little his imagination couldn’t create.

Winter felt something solid jostle his side, pulling him from watching monsters tear limbs and heads off while the screams were still ringing through throats spilling crimson. He saw his human arm fall to the ground with a solid fwump. Looked up at the human, a flat-headed weapon in his hands. The human’s mouth was nearly as agape as his eyes. Surprise sat there, mixed with fear bleeding faster than the courage that moved him.

Winter smiled at the human as he plunged his remaining hand – ice-tipped and sharp – through leather and fur, bones crunching beneath his fingers until he could feel the solid thump thump thump of his heart. It walked up his frozen veins, echoing that familiar beating he briefly felt in the presence of Summer.

Winter crushed it.

The human slumped to the snow in a pitiful pile, blood spilling from a sputtering mouth. His
hands were unmoving by the time his head lodged in the white.

Winter slathered the blood over the broken half of his arm. It writhed beneath torn silks, sprouting into a massive claw made entirely of ice. Three jagged fingers, each longer than his human head, and each aching for slaughter. Winter turned it over, admiring the sharp points. Much easier to rip through flesh. The blood swallowed streaks of almost-dawn, dark as pitch against glittering ice.

It was almost as warm as his Summer, the blood. The similar crimson that coursed through her human veins – *ba-dump, ba-dump* – free from pretense as he held her hands in his. The speed of her love for him could not be hidden in her own damning beat. Nor was the way she fell into his arms as he spun her round and round. Nor was the way she let herself go as he kissed her, as that curious thrumming started up in his chest. It was strange. It was...good.

He painted the tip of the longest claw in the dead man’s blood, bringing his hand up and tracing over his lips, imagining the warmth of Summer’s mouth against his. The tart metallic sting of autumn, of the earth at the beginning of rain.

He wanted her here. He wanted her beside him, everywhere, all the time. Attached to him and incapable of separation. And she *loved* him, Winter knew. She always did. She ran away last time because she hadn’t been ready, Winter told himself. Her human body imperfect to the one she presented him now.

Safe, and alive. That’s all that mattered right now. His beautiful, shining, radiant Summer would be waiting for him once he dealt with these humans.

*Don’t...*

There were other things he never told his Summer. This would be one of them.

But, how fun it would be, at least! The thrill that sent his false heart quickening: a hundred bodies prime for the cold embrace of death, waiting for their release from life. Winter rather enjoyed it when they fought back, as if they had a chance at winning.

Winter stepped through blood-soaked snow towards the throng of the screams, a smile pulling at his lips.

*They shan't have her.*

* * *

Arm and Eye were stronger than she would have expected, what with only three hands between them to hold her back. Even without them, Sansa wasn't sure she would even have been able to escape. She could see the hazy outlines of the world beyond the tower through the newly made walls, dark shadows captured in ice. The sun was just kissing the horizon off in the distance, even longer daggers of darkness crawling across the white landscape. The trees looked taller in their shadows.

How was it dawn already? It felt like no time at all since Winter showed her the magnificence of the ballroom at sunset, since he transformed her clothes into a dress made of starlight and frost. Once something she marveled at, the fabric felt heavier, constricting around her chest. She struggled against it. Struggled against her captors.

Her father was down there. Sansa didn't have to know to know. She tried to remember how large an army he brought with him when he left in search of herbs to save Cat. Not an army, a search party, perhaps ten or twenty.
And now, an army of a few hundred. And now, Sansa was the prisoner.

Through the thick walls, she heard it: screams.

Like the ship.
Like Highgarden.

_He lied._

Sansa pulled against Arm, hoping to have a better chance against his one arm than Eye’s two. “Please, let me go!” she yelled. “I _have_ to get down there. My father… Please.”

They couldn’t talk, they couldn’t _understand_, deaf only to Winter’s commands.

She hardly managed to wrench a few inches across the floor before she remembered: her stave! It sat forgotten against the ice wall, the white wood blending in. So far away, but maybe…maybe if she reached it, she could channel her fury and frustration and fear into something strong enough to shatter through her guards and the walls. And then fly down and stop her god from murdering every last person.

She didn’t _need_ her stave, she knew, the magic already flowing through her veins. Unless she wanted to chance losing her hand.

Looking back at her were twenty Sansas, each determined in their uncertainty. Warped in the ice, wrapped in frost. In some of them, Sansa saw someone who looked enough like her, and enough not.

One of them smiled at her.

There was a ringing, a squealing, like a red-hot sword dipped in water.

The walls cracked, shooting up from the base all the way to the top, cleaving the twenty Sansas into fragments. Wisps of chilled wind blew through, pulling and pushing on her skirts. Her stave rattled against the marble floor.

Arm and Eye exploded.

Sansa fell, catching herself on her hands and knees as she felt the remaining bits of her captors fall against her back. She didn’t dare look at what remained of them.

Then the walls exploded. Ice falling in jagged shards like shattered glass. In each of them, Sansa saw a horrid caricature of herself. She was glad when they fell down the long descent to the snow below.

The world was silent; as silent as it could be, with wind and screams and her own heartbeat filling it. The world was grey, lazy stripes of gold piercing through morning mist. Sansa clambered carefully to the edge, looking at the shadows shifting below. So many of them now; there weren’t just humans, she knew. So many of them not moving either.

Her legs were shaky as she stood. _What_ happened, Sansa couldn’t say, but she didn’t have time to think on it. _Magic_, she told herself, as if that was even a good explanation. Magic saved her, her magic.

Her stave thankfully hadn’t fallen or splintered. It suffered a few dings to the shaft, and the
uncarved head was intact enough. The wood looked simultaneously darker and lighter than she remembered, burnt and charred. No matter; it lifted her up just as good as her old stave did.

She pulled her hair back and tucked it into the collar of her dress. And her fingers brushed the cool, sharp edges of her crown.

She’d forgotten about it. How intricately Winter had carved it from snow, each of the smallest icicles glittering as she lifted it, twisted it this way and that. The sun on the tallest spire was shimmering gold.

There was the other gift, sitting in the hollow of her throat. She touched it, feeling the worn warm silver beneath her fingers. One hand: a crown made for her, for Summer. One hand: her mother’s pin, all but the last thing she had of the late Catelyn Stark.

Sansa dropped the crown, watching it shatter like Winter’s had.

She kept her head low as she zoomed through the early morning fog, feeling fresh snowflakes tickle her cheeks as she flew. She was still a long way off from the brunt of the battle, but Sansa could see – and taste – it. The harsh sting of blood against sharp winter frost.

The things she fended off in Highgarden were tame compared to the things that clawed and devoured her father’s army. Just as monstrous, made of ice and stone and whatever remaining bits of flesh that remained after years – decades, centuries – of death. Their cries were horrible, sending a separate chill of fear down her spine than the cries of humans cut short.

And beyond where she flew over the closest throng of fighting, hardly a mile south, were other specks zooming above the trees, reds and oranges exploding from their hands.

*The other witches*, she thought, curious which were fighting to save her from Winter. Was Old Nan here, to make amends for the times – twice! – she messed up. And Margaery, gods, was she alright?

Would any of them forgive me for what I’ve done. That thought had Sansa’s course paused mid-air, watching as they flung magic at unseen monsters below.

Something cold grabbed her foot.

She fell, snow-capped branches whipping at her on her descent. Sansa had time enough to flip over and slow herself down, but the ground came up faster and harder than she expected. Air escaped her lungs.

A shadow blurred her vision. Sansa blinked the shock from her eyes, gasping for air. A knight raised his warhammer above him – the steel head glistening in frost and the edges rimmed in blood.

“No!”

She felt the air of his swing before she closed her eyes.

But it never hit.

Looking, the knight was fighting off a six-legged monster with over three times as many sharp fangs, all primed to rip out the man’s throat. There were tears falling down his cheeks, frozen against skin. His warhammer lodged between teeth that grew closer and closer with each heartbeat.
Sansa pulled slumbering vines and roots from beneath the snow, willing them around the
monsters legs, throat. It gnashed against its restraints, blind except for its one mission: to kill. Sansa
tugged the roots tighter, pulling them down against the snows.

The knight smashed his hammer into the monster’s head, hard enough shards of ice lodged
into the tree nearby.

Still the monster writhed. Sansa set the roots aflame.

When the thing had all but melted away, she looked at the man she saved, who nearly killed
her. He looked embarrassed. “I…” the knight said, struggling for air. “A-a-a-pologies, m-lady. I
thought you were one o’ ‘em…”

Sansa remembered the dress, the fact Winter had fashioned it just like his own gown. She
was suddenly grateful for leaving the crown behind – gods knew what her father’s men would think
had she appeared completely like a queen of winter and ice.

As if reading her thoughts, the knight’s face sparked. “Oh. Oh!” He brushed his hands on
his furs – his gloves were missing, and his fingers were purple from bruises and the cold. The man
grabbed hers, and surprisingly his hand was warmer. Sansa started at his touch. “You’re her! The
lord’s daughter. You’re Sansa!”

“I-” Sansa stammered, not sure what to say. So she didn’t say anything.

The knight found purpose then, and pride. It was much kinder on his face than fear, than
fury. He hefted his warhammer in his hand, bits of ice sloughing off. “Come, m’lady. Your father’s
been looking for you.”

That brought Sansa’s voice back from silence. “Do you know where he is?” Do you know if
he’s alive?

The man gave a half-shrug. “I...I haven’t seen ‘im since last night. He and Ser Rodrick went
up to scout the palace, last I saw ‘im.”

“I…” Sansa tried to not let that defeat her. Not knowing was better than knowing he was
dead, surely. She smiled at the knight; what else could she do save fall back on pleasantries and
manners? “Thank you, good ser, for saving me.”

He smiled at that, and honestly, beneath the frost and grime covering his face, he was a
comely man. Eyes, when not hells-bent on smashing his warhammer into her, were soft and bright.
Filled with purpose. “Come, m’lady. Let me take you to your father.”

It shot up from the ground, neither he nor Sansa saw it coming.

The thing was a long, slender shard of ice, piercing up through the snows straight through
the knight. Straight through, up, and jumping up out from his head.

Half the knight fell against Sansa, the other reaching for the ground if not for the entrails
holding the two halves together.

And blood. Lots of blood, spilling out in the space between his body. Sansa screamed,
pushing the knight off of her as she backed away from the monster. Fire. Yes, fire, she needed to
burn it before it got her, too. She needed to get to her father first before she died.

She couldn’t put him through the same pain.
Swirling heat formed in her hand as she eyed the thing. The monster stared back at Sansa without eyes, assessing her. She swore it was smiling, heady on the scent of blood.

It leapt away, drilling down through the ground again.

The fire in her palm sizzled out in her confusion. Only, she didn’t have time to think about it when the fear came pushing back up her throat. Sansa bit the bile back, clamping her hand over her throat and looking away from the mess of the knight. *He would have died anyways*, she told herself, eyes shut so tight it hurt. Hoping she could forget the sight of his body serrated in two.

She wouldn’t, she knew. That wasn’t something she would ever forget.

Still, she couldn’t let the knight’s death go in vain. *My father...*

Eddard Stark was here, was alive, at least since last night. He wouldn’t be dead, he couldn’t be dead.

Where was he? Alive, she hoped, she prayed.

Sansa climbed back on her stave, not before forcing herself to look back on the knight and setting what remained of him alight. It was the least she could to to repay him.

Sansa wove through the trees, desperately looking for her father, and desperately hoping there weren’t things worse than *that*, than the things she saw in Highgarden. Winter and Summer were tales from stories passed down for centuries. But they weren’t the only dark things lurking from stories into reality.

Things far, far worse, and far too real emerged from the shadows.

* * *

They didn’t stop coming.

Through the army of trees, across the frozen lakes, even the bloody ground beneath his feet. Hundreds of them. Off in the distance – what might have been fog rolling between the trunks to clear away the darkness of the night – *things* of ice and snow, outnumbering his own army at least two to one.

Ned swung Ice through the chest of a hound from wintry hell, trying to ignore the chill its howl sent through his own body. It fell but it didn’t die. Or, whatever the blasted things do instead of dying. A half-death, not alive but not gone. Ned worried about that, hearing his own men fall on the other side of the lake.

*Fire*. They needed fire if they wanted to stop the god’s army.

Neither he nor Rodrick had any. The trek to the waterfell took no time, even with the climb up the rocks to the peak. From there, they saw the palace, the outer walls as tall as Winterfell, and the inner walls taller. Each tower was sculpted perfectly from memory, even the bridges and parapets and sloughed stones of the Broken Tower.

It was Winterfell, wrought in ice.

“Should be easy to navigate through, eh, m’lord?” Rodrick had said as they watched the shadows of the trees for the god’s own scouts, for monsters.
Ned didn’t reply. He felt a curious combination of dread and anger looking at the thing. The only difference between the god’s Winterfell and the true one was a tower in the center, tall and piercing the starless sky. They were far enough away not to make out details, but Ned knew: Sansa was there. Trapped, afraid.

Small pinpoints blue of light shimmered in the room on that tower. And then they were gone, replaced by walls of ice.

“Did you…” Rodrick began.

It wasn’t long after that the screams started.

And dawn was upon them, quicker than either of them expected. It wasn’t something Ned could get used to, but even this was faster than it should have been.

“Run.”

They ran, down the sloping rocks of the waterfall, but they weren’t alone at the bottom.

Rodrick cut through his own monster, the shattered bits still moving besides the hound Ned pierced.

They ran, across the frozen lake, but it was a slow progress. More and more things appeared, to the point where Rodrick and Ned could do nothing else but run and pray for steady legs. Ned’s feet hurt with each pounding step, but he didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop.

He would never let the god win again.

“Almost…” Rodrick panted, not deigning to finish his sentence, but he didn’t need to. Ned saw it: the shore, less than a thousand feet away, and teeming with fighting. They weren’t heading towards anything better than the monsters behind them – whose claws scratched at the lake’s surface, whose growls and pants followed them with threats of growing closer, closer, closer. But the shore would provide safety in numbers.

To his right, Ned saw the silhouettes of the witches. Too few. Too few, he knew he should have demanded all of them to come with him to save Sansa. But that would have been foolish, greedy. The world below the Wall needed them; not because of what they could do with their magic, with their knowledge, but because there were things there not unlike the ones awaiting Ned and Rodrick on the shore.

Eight hundred feet.

Ned counted the witches. One, two, three, four, five.

Too bloody few.

He counted again. One, two, three, four, five. Six.

Ned nearly stopped in his tracks, stumbling. Rodrick moved a hand to push him on – “Watchit!” – but Ned was steady again, running.

Six! Six witches meant Sansa was there, alive. She had to be, she had to be. There was no way the world was so cruel to take her away, too. The thought alone had Ned pushing his legs harder.
Seven hundred feet.

He prayed he was right. About Sansa, about the cruelty of life.

The ground rumbled beneath his feet.

Both Ned and Rodrick stumbled, the monsters behind them too. Ned caught himself before he fell, one hand out, and he saw it shooting up beneath: a crack, large and white and moving way too fast.

All around them: cracks, spreading out as far as he could see.

The lake was breaking.

And they were seven hundred feet away from the shore.

“Run!”

Something slammed into Rodrick, and Ned smacked the monster with the butt of his sword. It wormed off enough for Rodrick to swing his arm into it, freeing it off his back. They sprinted, watching the cracks grow beneath them. There was no time to look and see what was causing it – no way a lake frozen for thousands of years would suddenly and inconveniently decide to crack now.

Ned chanced a look around, and swore the massive rock jutting up from the center of the lake moved.

Six hundred feet.

Five.

Four.

The lake was break along the cracks now, water seeping up and lapping at their boots. It wouldn’t be long before chunks separated with taunting cries of \textit{Jump over me, I promise I won’t send you plummeting down to the bottom of the lake}.

With lilting promises of \textit{I promise there isn’t anything waiting at the bottom}.

The ground rumbled again, shooting smaller cracks criss-crossing between the larger ones.

Three hundred feet.

Ned leaped over a valley of water, pushing himself forward on the floe. They were separating now, growing gaps that blocked their path. The things behind them didn’t care; splashes as they slunk down into the water, icebergs crashing against one another.

Ned just hoped there wasn’t anything worse waiting for them below.

“Careful!” He called out to Rodrick, pulling the man up. His foot slipped on the edge when something leapt and crashed into the edge. Rodrick’s breaths were short, his face pale and shining with sweat.

“Almost…” the knight gasped. The look in his eyes said he was doubtful.

Ned nodded, willing to look behind them.
The monsters were gone.

“Never a good sign,” Rodrick said, following his line of sight.

“No.”

But they had no other choice but to keep going, as fast as they could.

Their legs were betraying them more and more the closer they got to the shore. It was so close now, and the gaps growing too large they had to double-back too often for their liking.

Less than fifty feet. Ned could smell blood, taste it. It was sharp and fresh, and it came on the heels of cries. And smoke, he could smell smoke.

Three jumps left. And then...Ned didn’t want to think about it, about how tired his body was. Too little sleep and too much anxiety, and now a frantic journey on top of a battle with no end in enemy numbers in sight. There wasn’t enough stranger’s eyes to keep him awake without killing him. Ned looked over the tops of the trees – the witches were spread out zooming faster than before. They didn’t keep to one spot, and wherever they went left smoulders of burning ice. And – he held back a retch – smoulders of burning flesh. He only counted five witches. A tempting dream of seeing Sansa?

Ned heaved himself over the iceberg, turning back to grab Rodrick if he needed it. The jump wasn’t bad, the knight shouldn’t need his help. Rodrick leapt.

The ground rumbled again, hard and violently. Ned’s iceberg shunted back a foot, two. Rodrick’s face fell as his feet landed on air, his hands shooting up for Ned’s.

His chest slamming against the floe as he grabbed hold of Rodrick.

And so did something in the water.

“Fuck!” the knight swore, slamming his free leg into the thing as Ned pulled. By himself, Rodrick would have been fine; with a monster wrapped around his legs, Ned was barely able to keep Rodrick level.

“Get! The! Fuck! Off!” the knight yelled, slamming his boot with each word.

It fell, Ned knew, when Rodrick flew up in his grasp.

The monster leapt up, clawed hands poised to pierce through Rodrick’s back.

Ice sang through the air, catching the soft golden streaks of daylight. The monster fell between the icebergs, just as the one Rodrick leapt from slammed back into the one they stood on now. They shook, feet threatening to buckle, standing fast.

The shouts were words now. One of them, “Above!”

“You alright?” Ned asked Rodrick, who only nodded.

Almost there, they told themselves, even if they weren’t entirely prepared to deal with what lay on the other side. The last gap between iceberg and shore was large, as wide as either of them were tall. The water below was dark, black, like the starless night sky from before had been swallowed up in its depths.

They leapt-
-ice shuddering beneath her boots-

-eyes staring up at them from the darkness-

-colliding onto the icy shore with a resounding thwump, enough to knock the air out of their lungs. Ned breathed in sharply, snow filling his mouth.

They made it.

Or, something like that. Ahead of them, lost in the thick of snow and trees: bodies. Tens of them, too torn apart and ravaged to make sense which part belonged to whom. Even the things were hacked and melted to the point of indiscernibility.

Still: hundreds of them, gnawing on fallen horses, piercing through helpless knights. There were so many, too many.

All the armies in Westeros couldn’t stop the army of the dead.

“M-m-m-m’lord…” Rodrick stuttered out.

Ned willed his gaze away from the fighting,

And wished he hadn’t.

A monster, straight from the deepest hallowed pits below the earth.

Its tail crept out of the lake, revealing the thing in its entirety. Stark white like snow, and glistening in the morning light. Its wings bore it upwards, a single pair of claws poised to strike. And its mouth: rows upon rows of sharp teeth, jagged and broken, and capable of swallowing up Winterfell entirely in a single gulp.

Fear turned Ned’s blood frozen, stopped his heart long enough to imagine what dying by that thing would feel like.

It circled the lake in a single lazy circuit, as if waiting for all creatures – humans and beasts and monsters – to revel in its horrid, monstrous glory. One more circuit, and the remaining bits of the lake it had just shed free from fell from its massive body, ice sloughing from its skin to shatter against the floes below.

Somewhere behind him in the sudden silence of fear and awe, Ned heard laughter.

* * *

The arrow pierced clean through the canopy of leaves, sending a flurry of snow down.

Sansa was tired. An ache that existed far below her very soul, one that was borne from fear and the fogginess of the unknown. An ache that shuddered each time she tried to help someone, and each time the world laughed – cackling in her head, so loud, so scratchy, it didn’t stop even when she slammed her hands over her ears. The knights would start for her, think she was one of them, even with her stave and with magic flowing through her fingers. And then they would stop, and realize their mistake. And then they would die. Each time, Sansa burned their bodies, and she was growing sick with the smell of it.

It laughed, that voice: Ha! You thought you could make amends for what you had done! You thought you suffered enough? You’ve only just begun!
And now this, to cement what Sansa knew, what the voice said without saying:

This is all your fault.

Slowly she was making her way to the lake, the waterfall where the knight (nameless) said her father had gone to. But she couldn’t ignore the pleas and screams below. It was slow going, and Sansa debated (and hated that she did) leaving the innocent knights to die by the thing’s claws.

She couldn’t help but stare as the first rumbles tore through the earth, so violent Sansa felt them echo through the air itself and deep down into her bones.

And that monster was so huge, there was no way Sansa couldn’t not stare as it rose from the shattered lake. Up, up, revealing more of its horrors with each second. Every part of it was designed by some wicked creature to kill, from the hundreds of teeth to the barbed ends of its tail.

And that wicked creature, she wondered (feared) had just kissed her beneath a shifting aurora.

She had to find Winter. He had to listen to her. He had to.

If she told herself that enough, it would be true. It was, it was! He listened to her before. And he had changed, was changing. Sansa was doing things to him. His heart had beat! That had to mean something, if not for a sliver of reason left to listen to her as she asked – begged – him to stop.

Gods, she hoped it would be true.

Otherwise, there was always that third route. It sent a different shiver down her spine thinking about it. If only because Winter’s snide smile and empty eyes made her think he wouldn’t care. He would just wait, bide his time, until he found another human to call his.

That idea stung, too.

“It’s bigger than the last one…” someone muttered. From above her.

Sansa spun her head around, rearing her hand with fire. “Who’s there?”

The girl laughed, and Sansa forgot what a grinding sound it was. “Oh, it is you. I had thought so. No one else has that sort of mane, but I wondered, with that dress and all…”

Sansa kept her magic on hand (just in case, she told herself), as she rose to meet Silgard. “It’s still me. I’m still me.”

Silgard smiled, but there was no mirth there. “I can see that.”

The witch was the same, but not. Her hair was a lot longer than the last time Sansa saw her – on their hunt for Winter – and her eyes looked more sunken. As if there were things she’d seen in the past month that made her regret staying alive.

Silgard shot Sansa look, but she couldn’t stop staring as the thing – a dragon, if there was even a word for such a monster – rose higher and higher in the sky behind Sansa. Sansa looked, too, watching it even out into a circuit above the lake. It looked bigger.

“The last one’... Highgarden, you mean?” Sansa clarified, though she had the feeling as she said it she was wrong.

Silgard laughed through her nose. “Of course not. I wasn’t even there the first time. Stuck
with a pregnant cow. Or maybe it was a horse, I can’t remember.”

_The first time…?_

Sansa didn’t have to ask the question before Silgard started talking, starting with a nod. “Highgarden was the first. And then they moved. Up and down Westeros, from Dorne to Winterfell. I don’t really remember all of them, I was stuck up in the North. Too many of the fuckers to deal with.”

No. No, Sansa must have heard her wrong. She said as much. “Winter promised he removed all of his, er, things from below the Wall.”

Silgard was still smiling, and there was still a lack of happiness. “Nope.” She rested her head on her hand and her arm on her stave. “Your lover’s been content with keeping all o’ us shivering our balls off.”

“He’s not-!”

“Sil!” someone else cried out, and the telltale rush of air told Sansa another witch was heading towards them long before the witch zoomed up. “Sil, what are you doing!? We need to…”

Sansa’s cry caught in her throat. “Jeyne…”

Her friend, otherwise, looked shocked. Sizing Sanas’s outfit, and Sansa suddenly wished she’d torn it off. Going naked would have been preferable to seeing her friend’s disappointment, no matter how well Jeyne thought she hid it.

“Please,” Sansa began, fighting against the croak. “Jeyne, please tell me Silgard’s lying.”

Jeyne turned to the witch in question. “About what?”

Silgard shrugged. “How we’re all up to our heads in shit with the crap Sansa pulled. Her and her lover god been having a grand ol’ time these past coupl’a years while we been dealing with their shit.”

“Wait.” Sansa interrupted before Jeyne could say anything (anything more than the look in her eyes. Her eyes were sunken, too, her cheeks more hollow than the last time Sansa saw her). “_Years _?”

Both of them nodded slowly, as if it was obvious. Silgard was the one who spoke. “Yeah, Sans. _Years_. Five of ‘em. And honestly I thought your house was a load of crap with the _winter is coming_ shit, though I’d never tell that to Lord Stark. Turns out it’s true, and it fucking sucks.”

“But…” Sansa felt her stave falter, dropping her a few inches lower. She couldn’t believe it, didn’t want to believe it. Knew she was repeating herself when the words came out, “Winter assured me he would show _kindness._” Though what exactly was growing fuzzy. She made him promise to burn the bodies in Highgarden. Had she asked him to stop terrorizing people with his army of death?

Would he have, truly, if she asked?

Silgard scoffed, scooting close enough on her stave to say (or spit) in Sansa’s face, “Well, looks like it _lied_, di’n’t it?”

Another arrow whizzed by Sansa, so close she felt the feathers tickle her nose as it went by.
“Watch it, Sansa!” Jeyne pulled her close, sending fire down to sizzle at some monster below. “Gods, we need to get back down there! Too much time wasted- Ow, fuck!”

Jeyne let go of Sansa’s wrist as though she’d been burnt.

Suddenly Sansa felt it: all of that ache, that tiredness, that fear. Bubbling and brewing inside her, waiting for the right moment to come pouring out in waves, crashing and cracking through Sansa like tidal waves. Like a glacier slamming into a wooden ship. If she opened her mouth, a hundred, a thousand voices screaming, crying out.

It was the look of fear in Jeyne’s eyes as she stared at Sansa that did it.

Not crying, not screaming.

Sansa felt...numb.

Warm.

“Oi, shit!” Silgard swore, backing away, her hands covering her face. Jeyne did the same.

Sansa didn’t know what happened. All she saw was the snow on the branches around them melting, slipping through leaves to the branch below, hissing and shrieking as they made their journey to the floor. The leaves sprouted, small buds to bright green, fading just as quick to golden yellow and deep red before bursting into flame.

Each leaf, of each tree surrounding them. Growing and burning and sending waves of smoke through the pale air.

Sansa’s skin turned to goose-pimplles, and not because of the cold. The lack of it, as they soared out from the choking smoke and ash.

The rest of the trees (miles upon miles of them) were intact, snow weighing down their branches. And the fire wasn’t hot enough to not care about the centuries of winter frosting woods, not yet.

Sansa turned, from the rising smoke to the witches. She felt a million pricks on her skin, as if every single human and creature and thing was staring at her. They weren’t, they weren’t.

It was just Silgard and Jeyne, looking for all the world like Sansa was one of the things Winter unleashed from the pits of the earth. Silgard was staring at her with an open mouth and narrowed eyes. Jeyne, too, though she was less obvious. Surprise lit their faces, and fear. Most of the latter.

“I- I’m-” Sansa stammered. She wasn’t sure what she was doing, or how, but she tried her best to reign it in. No use: the fire was adamant in its hunger, slowly burning up the snowy floor, up frostbitten trees. And they were smoldering, filling the world with smoke and the cloying scent of pine.

“It’s true…” Jeyne muttered. She and Silgard shared a look, one that eventually fell on Sansa. Only, Sansa didn’t like the way they were staring at her, like they were...afraid.

Of her.

“What’s…” Sansa began, her throat tight and full of smoke. The warmth tickled her skin. “...true?”
Jeyne bit her lip, as if weighing *telling* and *not telling*. It suddenly hit Sansa (hard) that she never did tell her friend the truth of the dance, of the snows and the deaths and horrors Sansa unleashed because she couldn’t fight the pull to dance. And, maybe, there had been a reason bigger than selfish desire that pulled Sansa into the copse of trees that moonless night. “That you were – are – the god’s lover…”

“Summer…” Silgard added.

“I’m not, really.” Sansa said, raising her hands in defense. Gasping as she saw the white frost etched in her skin shimmer in the golden light. She clenched her fists.

“Regardless,” Jeyne said, trying to bring them back to reality. To the fact that below them were hundreds of monsters and far less men, fighting, killing each other. Over Sansa. Who was here, alive, and confused. “We need to get back down. Our men are *dying*, and fast.”

Silgard nodded, Sansa too, but the former was distracted. Or, re-distracted, as Sansa looked back and suddenly remembered that horrible creature. It was heading towards them, towards the smoke, a dark-grey beacon calling it. Its mouth was open, a silent scream, and Sansa got dizzy trying to imagine how many teeth there were.

“It’s all for piss if we don’t *stop that*,” Silgard countered, pointing to it with her chin.

Sansa agreed. “But my father-”

“Will thank you if you can manage to get rid of *that*. Won’t do us no bloody good when we’re all dead.”

“Sil…” Jeyne began.

“You’re safer up in the air, besides,” Silgard said, ignoring Jeyne’s plea. Her eyes were fixed on the *thing*, but the way she held herself straight made Sansa curious (and maybe a little proud? Or, perhaps something similar to it). That the girls who traipsed through the forest looking for Winter – afraid – were standing their ground. Were willing to lose themselves for the sake of the realm. That was what a witch was, after all. Selfless, and caring, and maybe just a little crazy.

Crazy, like going after a millennia-old beast that was approaching them. Hungry, ravenous.

“Burn them,” Sansa stammered out, not forgetting Jeyne. Her friend. “We need to burn them, their bodies.”

Jeyne nodded. “Anya is here, and Eryn and Wylla. Your father brought as many witches as he could spare to come up here to rescue you.” Jeyne bit her fingernail, ignoring Sansa’s gaze.

Five witches? Sansa couldn’t help but think her father’s plan to fight the god and rescue her deserved more than that, as evidenced by the horrors below, the horrors she’d just seen. The one floating in the sky. Unspoken between them, and maybe it was just Sansa’s thoughts that said it: *Because the rest of them are left protecting Westeros from the hell you unleashed.*

There was a warmth tickling Sansa’s body. Starting at her fingertips, following the etched ice veins up her arms. Up and up, until the warmth slid between her ribs and wrapped around her heart. *It will be okay,* she thought she heard it say, in a voice that wasn’t hers.

*You are Winter’s Queen. You danced with him beneath the black sky, and you danced with him beneath the universe.*
You are the goddess of Summer.

You will be okay.

At least, that’s what Sansa told herself as she followed Silgard and Jeyne towards the monster, its tail dripping down and crushing the tops of the trees leaving nothing but splinters. As she kept an eye below her for signs of her father, of Winter.

Maybe the god hadn’t been wrong, not about one thing at least.

* * *

Winter laughed.

Oh, he hadn’t laughed this hard in so long, not even when his Summer agreed to go with him and be his queen! Not even when he sent her such a lovely gift: a statue, of ice, made in her likeness.

Oh, how hard Winter laughed! And how loud it rang in the silence that fell over the world when the beast rose up from the lake. He made the pact some centuries ago – or maybe millennia? it was honestly too difficult to keep track when and where and what, when one had seen the birth of the earth and would live longer than its death.

It was horrifying. It was beautiful.

And it was hungry.

Winter marveled at its build, the way it was designed for its purpose: killing. Every part of it made for one thing, and how it did it! Winter loved the thing when it chanced upon his kingdom, and promised it safe shelter so long as it would do as Winter asked. Winter had nearly forgotten about it, cooped up beneath the water, with only a claw peeking above the surface to remind any who saw the lake that something worse lay beneath it.

Winter’s laughter was cut short as a ripple pulsed through the fabric of life. It echoed, a rhythm not unlike that curious heart, deep within his chest.

He felt her, his lovely queen, without ever having to turn around and see what a mess she was making of his kingdom. Winter could only laugh at the smoke billowing up, calling that beast forward like a beacon. Summer was there, he knew, he knew. And as much as Winter was afraid for his queen, he was excited.

Finally! Finally, she was showing her true self, shedding her beautiful human skin for one that was even more radiant.

And he did see her, just above the trees, flying towards the beast in a halo of fire. Her skin glistened like the midseason sun, her hair bright and coppery and alight.

So beautiful!

So absolutely wonderful!

And all his!

A new laugh rippled through his chest as he watched her. Until an arrow thudded itself in Winter’s chest. Barely the point of it embedded in his thick ice skin, but enough of an annoyance that
someone thought they were important enough to draw his gaze away from Summer.

More than the arrow was a human, lumbering, a great sword clasped between his fists as he charged straight towards Winter.

Winter couldn’t contain his glee as he recognized the man: his face stoic, his teeth snarling, his eyes! Oh, such fire in those eyes, almost as furious as the fire that wrapped itself around Summer.

Without care, Winter pulled the arrow free. It snapped easier than necks. He readied himself, the human’s feet loud thumps against the snow in the silence.

Winter heard his queen’s voice, quiet despite the storm that had brewed beneath them: Please don’t kill them.

Oh, but where was the fun in that? Look around us, my queen! he wanted to say, with her hands in his, thumbs tracing over the marks on her skin. Look, Summer, look! The world is so much more beautiful covered in crimson, don’t you think?

As beautiful a shade as her hair.

This human, however, had no qualms in killing the god (though, the chance of that was impossible!). This human had no qualms in rearing his weapon and striking Winter (or, trying to; Winter leapt aside at the last moment, watching the man lose his balance). This human (Winter knew), for all his anger and fury, had qualms about killing.

The only difference was – with Winter’s hand around the throat of a human, feeling the pulsating blood quiet down into a barely thrum; the crunch of their bones as red sneaked between his closed fingers – Winter didn’t.

Winter pummeled him with the back of his hand, feeling the shards of ice dig into the furs and scrape at leather and metal underneath.

The man caught himself, angry at the fact Winter was better (or maybe that was Winter perceiving what he wanted in those angry grey eyes). The sword slashed cold air as Winter maneuvered out of the way, and again, and again.

Please, don’t kill him, Summer pleaded.

Well, not at first. Winter would see how long he would last. It would make the final blow that more satisfying.

The human spun on his feet, sword drawn in front of him. “Where is she!?” he roared. His voice was deep and echoing; it drew the attention of both humans and creatures around them.

What a curious thing! Winter admired the human for his tenacity, and the fact his eyes were so sunken they might have been pulled from the back of his head. “Who?” Winter trilled, cocking his head despite the smile that was playing over his mouth. He let it bloom, a full smile, though reason for his happiness was not certain.

Like a wolf playing with its food.

The man lifted his sword, the point aimed at Winter. “You know exactly who, you bastard.”

“I’ve not a clue who you are talking about.” Winter let the truth fall from his lips as easily as he let the snows fall, swirling down in spirals. It wasn’t a lie, he knew, because this human could be
looking for someone else.

“You know exactly who. My *daughter* .”

How did they do it, humans, lying? Summer was a god! Summer had no father, no human father at least. She was as ethereal and mysterious as Winter was. No beginning, no end, just existence.

Winter closed his eyes, long enough to see his Summer. The love in her face as he showed her the garden he wrought forth for her, hidden away in a sunken cliff face. He had felt the damning beat in his heart, then, the fluttering of it.

The gods couldn't lie. His Summer *loved him*. He knew it, he knew it.

“I wish I knew. I would assume your daughter dead, if she were lost wandering this far north. It’s no place for humans.”

“You bastard!”

Winter opened his eyes, body moving of its own accord as the human reared again. The man swung, hard enough to chip one of Winter’s claws as he caught it. The shriek of metal on ice rang through the trees. Beasts scurried from between tree and bush, finding the one thing to truly be afraid of.

Well, two, but the second was far above, its shadow stretching over most.

The human, wrenched his sword free in time for someone else to strike at Winter. He was similar to the first man, but his weapon was different. A big chunk of metal, which chipped at Winter’s side. Winter couldn’t help but laugh. *This* was the thrill he missed! Oh, how fun it was to watch humans struggle, thinking they’ve won.

Nothing more exhilarating than squashing that, straight from their throats.

They assaulted him, two on one, and it was growing more and more difficult for Winter to reign back on Summer’s plea. He grew close to breaking it – too often – claws swiping strips of leather and metal free from their bodies. One of them was bleeding, fresh crimson staining Winter’s claw. He licked it.

The first human was angrier than angry. It made his strikes less predictable, earning a few chips in Winter’s body before he grew it back. With each slam the man shouted, “Where! Is! She!”

“She is not *yours*,” Winter quipped back, wondering if his own voice sounded as ferocious as the humans. “My Summer does not belong to you, but to *me*!”

The second human smashed Winter’s head off.

Winter howled.

In excitement.

Watched as his body turned and pierced that annoying man with both claws, blood spouting from the mouth. His claws – both with fingers together, pointed – quickly opened and shred the man in at least eight pieces. His head was still firmly attached to one of them, mouth open in an unfinished scream.
Winter grabbed his head and settled it back on, feeling the icy tendons and skin reattach itself.

The man – with the sword, with the daughter that Winter does not have – was afraid. It was writ plainly on his face, in the grip on his sword. But he did not back away, or run away, or bow down and beg for his life to be spared.

He, like an idiot, charged forward.

Winter ducked beneath the steel, slamming into the man. He heard his breath come out in a single gasp. No breath left when Winter pinned him down on the snowy ground.

He looked different. Smaller, less ferocious. The fire was there, but it ran out of fuel, burning itself up until there was nothing but a single spark. Poof – gone.

There was a trickle of blood coming from the corner of the man’s mouth. And something else:

“Please...my Sansa...”

“Is mine.”

Winter reared his arm back, wondering how cleanly he could split the skull.

Fire pelted him, coating his body in horrid steam. He screamed; or maybe it was the ice, shrieking under the neverending torrent of fire.

The man kicked him off, and Winter was glad for the reprieve of flame.

He shot his gaze towards the source of the fire. Stared at the curious human, until recognition came back to him in the glittering rainbow of sunset upon millions of shattered snowflakes. “You!”

She was panting, legs unsteady on the stave (he was grateful for the word, trying to remember the knowledge his Summer shared with him. Humans, and magic, and witches). The daylight didn’t hide the age of her skin. “Good to see I didn’t miss out on the fun.”

Somewhere in the distance, someone yelled “Ready!”

The two humans shared a stare at each other, hardly a moment, and Winter didn’t miss the slight shake of the man’s head, lifting it up a fraction. The witch tsked, raising herself up into the air.

“Where are you leaving to?” Winter asked. He wasn’t done with her yet. There was an explosive trick he wanted to repay her for, and was itching to do it now. But the fire...it was strong, sloughed off most of the left half of his body. It would take some time before Winter would regenerate. Ah, killing time, that’s what the humans called it.

The witch kept climbing up, but she deigned to reply. Her voice was cold. “As much as I would like to stay, it seems there’s something else I need to take care of.”

The man remembered the beast, then, staring up at it. It was peppered in fire, nothing horrid enough to bring it down. Winter wasn’t sure there was a way to kill it, other than wait for it to have its fill of devouring – people, places, mountains – and then fall back into its slumber.

But there she was! Summer, brighter than the last time Winter spied her, her body covered
in flames. Oh, those flames could do so much worse than the ones this witch unleashed. Summer could – without knowing, perhaps – burn Winter until he was nothing but wisps of air and a faded memory of snowfall. He could do the same to her: freeze her until she burned up, burned out, and smash the shards into a million multicolored fragments. A curious game, their existence.

He wouldn’t kill her, of course. Neither would she do the same to him.

Because she loved him.

Winter stared at the man. His breaths left heavy puffs of white from his lips, sweat beading down his face. Cheeks red and eyes burning with a fire not unlike Summer. “Have you not finished your futile effort, human?” Winter asked. He could feel his ribs growing back, and part of his shoulder.

The man’s fingers wrapped tighter around his weapon. He must know this was the opportune time to strike. So there was something else he was waiting for. Unless he truly was a fool: the longer the man waited, the easier it would be to kill him.

And the sweeter his blood.

Winter glanced up again at Summer. A shooting star across a pale gold sky; beyond her, the faintest twinkling of stars.

And in front of her, of course, a roaring monstrosity that waited far too long to reawaken. All hundreds – maybe thousands – of its teeth open.

Winter looked down at the human again, taking a generous step backwards for good measure. Winter wasn’t fond of the way the man followed him. Maybe he wasn’t the fool. “Break her out of it,” the human said. Demanded, as though he was forgetting which of them was the god. “Now.”

Winter cocked her head, well and truly confused now. “Out of what? There is nothing wrong with her, not now she has awoken!”

“Stop it!” The human swung steel into Winter’s left side, Winter barely dodging. His leg was weaker than he would have liked. No matter – a little longer, and Winter would be fine.

“She is not under a spell,” he began, pointing up to his love with the remaining jagged claws, as though the human might not have seen her! Blind, in his fury as he was. “She is the goddess! She is the Summer, radiant and divine and mine!”

The human didn’t bother replying with words, using steel instead.

“Aim!” that same someone yelled.

Winter’s left was merely a stub, his leg better at maneuvering himself out of the way. But the human was smart (not the fool, then, certainly). Favoring strikes on the left, where Winter’s free claw struggled to swipe the sword away should it get too close.

“She’s! Not! Yours!”

A strike for each word.

“Yes! She’s! Mine!”
Winter countered, feeling his strength returning. His hand shot out and grabbed hold of the man’s sword, cursing the open opportunity he was wasting for a fatal strike with his other claw (still not fully formed) through his chest. Not as fun as through the head, but just as effective.

He pulled the man close, so close Winter could see himself in the man’s grey eyes. “You are a fool to think she is anyone else’s but mine.”

The human glanced (so quickly) to the side before pushing him away, sword and all. Winter stumbled, tossing the sword away. What would he need steel for?

And what would the man go without?

“Fire!”

Winter heard that now-familiar **fwip** of an arrow whizzing past his head. Only, this one was massive, thick enough to spear cleanly through the oldest trees in Winter’s forests.

He watched it arc up above the snow-capped trees, higher and higher, a gleaming streak of silver against a pale yellow sky. Its destination was obvious.

It pierced through the dragon – straight through a chest gaping and rimmed with fire, endless holes ripped apart from years of slumber beneath the waves.

No matter. There were a hundred other creatures waiting to awaken and taste the lovely sting of blood. Winter listened to the thing howl, curious if it knew what pain was.

Only, the arrow pierced clean through the dragon.

Through his Summer.

The halo of fire extinguished – **fwip** – in the blink of an eye.

And she was falling.

Winter roared.

* * *

It happened too fast.

The dragon didn’t care who or what was on which side. It was slow in the air – a solid mile long, and wider than the thickest walls of Winterfell. But it let its tail and claws drop down as it soared towards them, obliterating anything in its wake. It was tired and hungry for death, killing anything within its reach.

And that included Sansa, who’s fiery beacon called it out from the lake towards them. Not because it saw it necessarily, but because it smelled it. It only had one eye remaining of its six, the rest pecked at over centuries by hungry fish. The dragon might not be able to see where the witches where, or where the army was, or where the palace stood – the tallest spire crumbling beneath its stocky tail as it flew past – but none of that stopped it.

Hungry, too hungry, too starved.

Sansa tried to unleash more of it: of that fire, that burned trees and smashed through the thick ice in the palace (that **had** to be the reason). The fire that burned within her and without her, coating her in a sheen of flames, sparkling like a star.
But all the flames left her.

“You bloody thing!” Silgard clamped her legs tightly around her stave as she hurled fire with both hands – white-hot at its center – into the face of the dragon. Over and over and over again, not because it worked, but because they had tried everything they could think of. All futile.

Its scales were too thick, despite the age. Not to mention it probably didn’t feel the fire, it too big and their magic too small.

“The heart, then?” Jeyne screamed, flying a wide circle around the breadth of the monster. She was bleeding: the claw nipped at her side, and though she had poultices to staunch the wounds, they weren’t meant to be applied mid-air while fending off a ferocious monster. The fire she flung at it sizzled against it’s skin, pointless.

“The what!?” Silgard shouted.

“Heart!”

Jeyne flew far out from the wing, speeding up towards Silgard as Sansa did the same. She was out of breath, wincing as she held onto her side. “The heart. You know, inside it. It’s the only thing that’s vulnerable.”

They stared at the gaping maw, all of its rows of pointed teeth, and hoped the bits stuck to them weren’t the remains of people.

“Are you mad?” Silgard replied. “That’s death in there, it is!”

“I know…” Jeyne sighed, either because of how fruitless their efforts were (when there were countless people down below dying, or being turned into those undead things, and they were up here wasting their time and energy), or because of the wound. Both, Sansa thought.

“Could the bullet pierce it?”

Jeyne shrugged. “Maybe? It’s movements are slow enough, but who knows where the heart is.” She added, “if it has one.”

“The what? What’s the bullet?” Sansa asked.

Silgard pantomimed slinging an arrow, firing it. “But a big one. It’s in one of the carts. Or was. Fuck knows if the things destroyed it.”

“Why did my father bring it with him?”

Silgard was quiet about that, Jeyne too. Sansa knew her answer the minute she asked it: to kill Winter. Or at least try to.

Sansa was quiet against the whipping wind around her and the cacophony of war below. And the dragon, bellowing out, searching for them. It was growing bored; soon, Sansa worried, it would fall down between the trees and kill all it could touch.

And then after that? Surely it wouldn’t be satisfied. Something that huge.

She looked south, towards the Wall. Shrouded in mist, but cutting a jagged line across the horizon. “I’ll do it.”

Neither Silgard nor Jeyne heard her, watching the beast and thinking on the pitifulness of it
The dragon might have been smiling for all the destruction it caused. All that it was about to wreak upon Westeros. Essos. The entire earth.

“I’ll do it!” Sansa shouted, hating herself as much as she knew she had to do it.

“What?” they shouted at the same time, holding onto their staves as the dragon’s wings beat them back. It was turning, moving to face the lake. Its tail smashed straight into the palace again, sending massive chunks of ice through trees.

“The heart. I can...I can take it out. I’ll do it.”

“Sansa, please,” Jeyne began, but the rest of her words fell short.

“We can use the bullet, too,” Silgard added. “Or, instead.”

Sansa knew where they were going, but she shook her head. “No. I… I have to do it. I unleashed this—she motioned to the horrid scene around them, and the smells whipped up on the winds, “-and I need to stop it.”

“Don’t be foolish.”

Sansa ignored her. “Go set up the bullet, if you want. But I’m doing this.” Her magic decided to kick in, then, sending sparks down her arms in the trail of Winter’s frost. They stood out, and the witches shuffled back on their staves. Behind them, the dragon was nearing its circuit, roaring again in frustration. Maybe it liked being pelted with fire. Maybe it liked the thrill of playing with its food before it smashed them between its infinite set of teeth. They were facing the sun, now, and glinting. All hundreds of them.

Jeyne’s mouth hung open before she answered. “No... No! Sansa, no, please! You’ll die.”

To think Sansa had contemplated killing herself earlier to trick the god. And now, well…”What other choice do we have?”

Silgard – one quick to violence – was even quiet. “Something...better than that. The bullet could work, or we could...we could...”

Exactly. “There isn’t anything better,” Sansa countered. Was she proud how steady her voice was, or concerned how easily the words fell from her lips? A life for the realm… “My fault. All of it, all of this. It’s my fault.”

“Sans…”

Behind her, Sansa felt the creeping rays of sunlight. Her body was warm, warmer than even sitting in the hot springs beneath Winterfell. Winterfell...she would miss it, dearly. Its familiar stones, her family, the witches.

Her father. Gods, she hated doing this to him.

At least Jeyne and Silgard could tell them what she’d done.

It was for the best.

Sansa felt the fire before she saw it, coating her skin...
Go, Sansa, the voice inside her whispered. It was sweet now, hardly the grating thing before. Comforting, almost.

Sansa didn’t look back, didn’t say goodbye, before she sped forward.

“Sansa! Shit, Sil! Shit,” Jeyne swore. “Go, go to the bullet, now!”

Silgard was racing down to the trees and Sansa staring (literally) into the belly of the beast. And she was fucking terrified.

“Sansa! Wait!”

It wasn’t Jeyne.

It didn’t matter.

Sansa dove towards the beast. Fire whipped in front of her, she was going so fast, and the breath from the monster was overwhelming.

It watched her, with its one good eye.

“Please work, for the love of everything, please.” Sansa reached up to touch her mother’s pin – comfort, she needed comfort, needed to know that maybe wherever her mother’s soul rested, she was proud now of her daughter, and not when she stupidly danced with the god. Only, her pin was gone.

Sansa was going into this alone.

The beast looked frozen, as if waiting for the opportune moment to clamp down and rip Sansa into three, four, five pieces. Five rows of teeth, good gods.

She took in a breath.

“Please.”

Lowered her head as she willed herself to go faster. Crossing the threshold of the mouth, and she saw the bottom jaw rise up, feeling the hairs on her back rise as the teeth above her neared, too. Daylight was fading, and she was barely through the third row.

Fourth.

Fifth-

Her boots scraped the inside of the jagged teeth.

And there was nothing but darkness around her as her flames licked up, as if aching to be released.

Not yet.

She couldn’t tell how far she was in the thing, hoping whenever she exploded would be far enough.

Sansa wove through the beast, hating the smell, hating the sounds.

Hating herself.
At least it would work, it had to work.

And then: a heavy, reverberating *ba-dump*, so strung out Sansa hadn’t thought it was the heart until the second thump pushed against her body, threatening to squeezing the life from her inside before it devoured the rest of her.

The heart!

*Please*, the flames were whispering, as hungry as the beast she was inside of.

She waited until she heard the beating again, louder this time. A painful echo in her head. She screamed, screamed again when the final *-thump* shook every single fiber of her body.

And then she exploded.

Fire pulsing out of her body in every direction.

It crawled up the walls of the beast, licking until it tore endless holes through the membrane to the one beyond that, and the one beyond that. Until gaps of blinding light shone through – the sun.

And a howl, deeper than the heartbeats and smashing her own heart inside her ribs.

She had to get out.

Out. Outoutoutoutout

Out!

Sansa wove through the flames, through the falling bits of beast that sloughed off in burning chunks. And gods it smelled so *horrible*, but the light was there! Fire eating at the edges, egging her on. *Here it is*, the flames said as it widened the holes, slicing up along the beast. She was going to make it.

Through.

Through!

Sansa breathed in deep lungs of fresh air, feeling fresh tears prick at the corners of her eyes where the smoke tickled her face. She felt bile, too, and there was a grimy layer coating her skin.

But she made it.

Sansa turned on her stave, coughing up bits of the thing as she stared at it.

A hole torn through its center, fire nipping at the edges. And in the center – held aloft by two thick veins, one on either side – the massive thing of the heart. Charred black. And beating.

She missed.

A gaping hole in her heart sucked in darkness as she stared at the evidence of her failure. She suddenly wished the flames took her, too.

“Sansa!” someone called.

She didn’t look, not willing to see the failure mirrored in Jeyne’s eyes.
Maybe if I try again… Sansa tried to will all the fire she had left, but there was hardly a drip. She barely had the magic to stay aloft on her stave.

Except it didn’t miss.

The arrow – as tall as a human and heavier than one, solid steel – pierced straight through a heart.

Sansa’s.

The world was coming up too fast as she plummeted – down down down down.

Sansa felt it – felt Summer – the warmth of the goddess’ fire slipping away with each of her remaining heartbeats. She was leaving Sansa, because the gods couldn’t save her.

She was already dead.

* * *

“No!”

Ned took a step forward, as if maybe he could cover the mile distance between him and his daughter. Another step, as if his body was telling him Yes, you can.

But he couldn’t.

Not with a frozen lake, its icy floes crashing against one another, spanning between him and where Sansa was bound to fall. Not with the god of winter standing in front of him, watching in horror as his monster lived and Sansa didn’t.

Horror? Ned wanted to laugh at the idea of the god ever finding something horrible enough to know the feeling of its soul leaving. Ned felt hollow, empty, a curious mix of angry and afraid and exhausted.

Everything – and for naught.

Her body was on fire as she fell, a trail of burning red and orange tracing her descent. The massive arrow was stuck inside her chest, pushing her across the skies as quickly as it pulled her down to the earth.

Ned couldn’t do anything – again – as he watched the cruel fate of the gods take his daughter away.

The fires fell faster than she did, spraying across the pale morning like shooting stars fallen on the earth. Snow sizzled at the touch, the trees burning up as quick as the flames licked them. Spreading fast, so fast, Ned knew it was far from a normal wildfire.

Sansa was halfway to the ice ground by the time the entire lake was ringed in flames. Things and people howled, and the smell of ash only barely overtook the smell of putrid flesh.

The emptiness gnawed at him, not content with the shell that stood where Ned Stark once did. Trying desperately to find where his courage had gone, the determination. The willingness to sacrifice so much to save his daughter.

No. He could do something.
Ned lifted Ice – it was heavier, or his body too weak to go on, knowing his daughter was… – and rushed forward. His feet didn’t make a sound. The screaming of death, the crackling of fire, his own breaths; they all fell away into a solid *ba-dump* inside the hollow of his chest.

The world had gone still in between his own heavy heartbeats.

And in that silence, Eddard Stark plunged Ice straight through the heart of the god of winter itself.
Sansa hadn’t felt the wind whipping her skirts as she plummeted. Or the simultaneous burn and freeze of the thick metal piercing her chest. Or the jolt of cold that flooded through her veins as the comforting fire that once embraced her body left in the span of a heartbeat.

She wasn’t even sure she felt that certain, sudden jolt shooting through her as her body must have sunk down and down to the deepest depths of the lake. To replace the burning carcass that flew – still alive – as a heavy shadow above swirling ice floes. A life for a life, but Sansa wasn’t sure she was even worth a fraction of what that thing had been, for all the death it dealt.

She had to have fallen a long way if she hadn’t felt the bottom of the lake yet. Above, watching the light turn into pinpricks of white before being swallowed up by the weight of water above her.

Only, she didn’t feel much of anything.

A dream, maybe. Like all the other times Sansa thought – wished – it all had been a dream. The dance, and the roses, and the fighting, and the kiss with the god… It all seemed so impossible, so unreal. Nothing more than a fantastical story, told from the old witches to the younger. A tale to keep the children behaving or else a litany of horrors would face them. Like how Sansa warned Bran and Rickon of ghosts who waited in alcoves at night, looking for delicious little children to snatch up and devour should they found be wandering out of their beds.

And a story her life was now. Look, whispered with fingers tracing over intricate illustrations of someone who looked a little too much like she did. Look what happens should you mess with the gods. Is the end of the world worth so much as a kiss?

A story had an ending. Ink dried, with only the last few letters smudged. But a dream meant instead that none of it was real. That (perhaps) it had all been a fanciful idea of her imagination. A false truth of What if, where Sansa was the main character who went traipsing through wonderful wintry worlds, who found the handsome love of her life. What a curious dream it was, and not at all the kind she would have thought to have, having given up whimsical stories years ago.

And a dream she had yet to awaken from.

Sansa wasn’t sure whether she preferred it being a dream or not. If it was, then none of it was true. The wretched snows and winds that piled higher and higher with each passing day. The ill-given gifts that – sweet as they were – left the bitter taste of death rumbling beside her quickened heart. The idea gnawed around the edges of that newly made hole in her chest. Growing bigger at the idea that her affection, and Winter’s, was nothing but a once-forgotten childish whimsy.

And if it wasn't. And if Winter made real, and his love genuine, and Sansa’s affections...

Still, she had yet to reach the bottom of the lake. Still, she had yet to feel the burning freeze of its waters lapping around (and through) her.

With a heavy heart, Sansa knew it wasn’t a story, and it wasn’t a dream.
She only wished she knew where she was. Maybe Sansa was finally privy to the workings of the universe: Here, it was telling her, see it's all just a dream.

Was it possible to feel so empty in a dream?

Except, wherever here was, she wasn’t alone. In her dream, in some place not quite real and not quite imagined, Sansa could feel the presence of another. Not figuratively – not the shiver of knowing someone was watching discreetly behind a column or tree, only to slink away should Sansa glance their way. But in truth. She knew it in the warm press of a body beneath her head, the soft strokes of someone running their fingers over her head. They smelled like budding roses and the sweet saltiness of the ocean and happiness. She didn’t know how to describe it; it was a feeling as much as a smell.

Sansa suddenly hoped it was a dream. All of it, all ten years of it. That she would awaken in the lap of her mother, lazily stroking her head after a nightmare overtook her child. Whispering nothings of It’s alright, my sweet, it’s alright.

Oh, what Sansa would give to hear – to ignorantly swallow – that lie.

Her eyelids were heavy, resistant. Squinting against stark white, shapes formed slowly into the assumption of trees, of mountains off in the distance, of a hand gliding down the side of her face. Sansa looked up, blinking the silhouette into focus.

She was greeted by her own face. It looked down at her, tilted. The same lips were parted in amusement, and the same hair framed her face. She didn’t look as old as Sansa remembered, but it had been a long time since she last saw her. Over ten years.

Ten years at least since the god of winter last cast his affection on a human.

Ten years at least since Sansa last felt the warmth of both pairs of arms around her.

Mother-

The word caught in her throat, strangled into a sob.

If Cat was here – smoothing her hand over Sansa’s hair, no doubt a mess of tangles and thorns, skin warmer than even Sansa remembered, and hair burning deeper than the embers of a welcoming fire – then there was only one truth. Only one reason why Sansa never felt any of her descent or her crash into the dark waters.

Sansa was dead.

* * *

Winter hadn’t felt the sword pierce his chest. He was aware of it, though, the chill of metal pressed right up between where the bones of his human body had once sat. Were he still made of flesh and blood, Winter knew the metal wound dangerously close to that curious bit of muscle. (And yet, he could have sworn he felt it thrum just then, the phantom of a beat. It didn’t, it couldn’t). Winter was aware of the human man, too, who proposed the idea that Summer didn’t belong to Winter, and worse: that she wasn’t Summer.

Winter was aware of the fighting, too, the once-deafening cacophony of screeching of ice against blades, the screams of the dying and the howl of his creatures – which had turned eerily silent the moment the flames sputtered out.
In truth, Winter wasn’t really aware of any of it, not anymore.

All he could do was watch the fading trail of flames behind his lovely queen as she plummeted.

No!

A step forward, and the metal between shoulder blades of ice sunk in deeper. It stung, unlike the metal of the other humans. And it dug in, the glint of its point just visible through Winter’s front. And it hurt, an almost screeching sort of pain. A pain unlike when others slammed their metal tools against his frame, or even when that other human smashed Winter’s head apart, or when that accursed witch pelted him with fire. But, this pain was under-shadowed by the pain of watching his queen descend.

Of watching his queen die.

The phantom beating in his chest disappeared.

No! No, no no no no! Who was he – a god! – to think that his Summer could die by human hands!? Who was he to watch as she fell, limp, to the ground, with hardly a spark to her skin? Who was Winter to let humans defeat gods!

Who was Winter to let humans live.

Only, his Summer cared about those ridiculous creatures living in their wood– and stone-buildings. She asked – no, begged – for Winter to show a sliver of mercy. Winter did, only because the smile on Summer’s face was too beautiful a sight to pass, when the other was worried and terrified (a sight beautiful, too, hauntingly so. Except the smile made his own human body ache for something he wasn’t sure). And only because Winter loathed the thought of losing her again. Of having to search for her, alive and beautiful in his season. It wasn’t like Summer to walk the world when the trees were heavy with snows and white filled the land rather than lush greens and deep golds. But who was Winter to ignore her whims when he could give her them, and so much more.

Summer gave life to the humans through her warmth, through the prosperity of their animals and crops. And Winter? Death, frost, disease. No wonder their dances felt contrived when he left the world, and felt so full when she returned. No matter. Winter didn’t want the false love of them.

Winter only wanted the love of his Summer.

He had spotted a flash of red amongst the darkness that night. A trick of light, flickering candles, and the twirl of him and Summer between the human dancers. The forest they danced in was as dark as the shadows that bowed beneath his shifting form, but his Summer was brighter than each of the suns kept in those small glass houses.

He chanced a look through the darkness of trees. Black as pitch.

And in Summer's place was her, solid and flowing between one dancer and the next.

And she smiled, and laughed, and looked so happy – happier than even he saw her the last she walked the earth. Her feet moved to the rhythm of the dancers, and Winter felt that hypnotic beating, too. Not around him, but inside him.

Winter watched her, even as she stopped and stared at him, uncertainty marring her face.

He tasted her fear as he reached out for her with a hand made of shadows, calling for her with
howling winds that tossed her clothing.

She ran, not before Winter felt her heart beating against the cold earth.

So curious, his Summer! Like the humans, she possessed a beating in her chest, one that grew surer the closer he brought himself to match her form. Winter had tasted the rhythm of it as he pressed his lips to hers, as he caressed her face, her arms. As he let his fingers trail over those pretty marks on her skin – his marks, swirls and snow permanently etched on her lovely porcelain body. Her human form was wondrous, and watching her encased in flames – fire that could melt him – was breathtaking.

It was breathtaking watching her fall, too, for a different reason.

The human behind him was tired, Winter knew. His hands shook around the handle of the massive steel blade, its vibrations beating against his icy form.

That once-curious beating in his chest had gone quiet.

No, Winter paid the steel no mind. Not when all Winter could focus on was the fact that Summer – his Summer, so lovely and beautiful and sweet – was plummeting, her flames smothered. That wretched bit of metal glistened against the sun, marking her path down down down towards the broken floes of ice below.

Winter shot through the world, leaving a thousand millions flecks of ice in his place. The faint rattle of metal on snow eked through the whipping winds as he tore through the world.

Winter extended his arms, transforming the jagged claws into softer shapes. They glittered in the sun wherever they had remained clean of crimson – the too few spots of solid ice.

So close. Winter shuddered at the sight of that horrid bit of metal sticking through her body. This close, he saw the how the front half was charred red; the same color when Winter tore his body through humans. The same color coating his hands and body.

He might have wondered how his Summer had created such a realistic human form. And he would, could, as he felt the silky brush of her tattered dress slide between outstretched claws. Oh, Winter would need to craft his queen a new dress, a finer dress, one for each of the glittering constellations on the jet black night. A gown fit for his queen-

A cloud of flames and steam licked her from this world before she crashed into the lake.

His Summer was gone, his hands dragging through snowflakes and smoke in the air.

Gone-
-gone-
-gone.

Dead.

* * *

Ned hadn’t felt the cold as the god exploded into thousands of snowflakes and slivers of ice, each raining down in the morning sunlight. Some splattered against his face, and he would have felt them if he hadn’t been so damned cold.
His arms ached from the weight of Ice, but he didn’t let go, not as it pierced into the frozen floor.

The god wasn’t dead, Ned knew. Valyrian steel, forever sharp and lethal, had been said to take down dragons and impossible beasts of nightmares. But slaying gods? Surely there would have been stories of men taking over the world had they discovered the steel to do it. Unless Ned was the first, watching the snowflakes rain down around him in multicolored rays of the sun.

Except, the world was still frozen.

The snows seeped in through his leathers and furs as Ned collapsed onto his knees. Ice finally clattered amidst the debris of the god, Ned’s arms aching too much to hold it up any longer. He barely had the strength to hold his body up, the shakes roaring down his entire body.

Thoughts pounded the strength from his arms, bit by bit:

*You failed her, your daughter.*

*The god is still alive, and he would rather see Sansa dead than give her back.*

*You failed.*

*Again.*

*Failed.*

Sounds slowly came back in. First his breath, ragged and short, visible in the hazy clouds from his lips. The air stung his throat, his lungs. It was so gods-damned cold up here. Then his heart, a roaring pounding that momentarily stilled with each growing thought that had his arms just barely holding himself aloft. Then the wind, howling through the trees even as Ned felt none of it’s force. As though the world itself was angry.

No, not the world. The god.

Only, there were few other sounds to be heard. The world sounded far quieter than Ned remembered, even through the heavy beating of his heart in his head. Each pulse hammered against his temples. Ned stared through the whirling snowflakes where the god once stood, out into the throng of trees.

Those things were...gone.

Ned blinked, again, smashing his thumb and forefinger against closed eyes. But each time he reopened them, the same world greeted him.

His men looked as confused as he felt, weapons drawn but lowering. Each looking around – side to side, but up, down, around, everywhere – waiting in agony for the things to pounce again.

A minute passed. Two. And either the god understood the art of fear better than Ned would have expected, or the truth was plain.

They were gone, dissolved into snow as their god had the moment Sansa’s heart was pierced.

Ned’s legs shook as he clambered up onto tired and cold feet. Spinning around countered what his eyes were willing to be false: that the world was empty save for men and trees and snow.

Above, Ned spotted no trace of that wretched flying thing. He could smell it, more vile than
human flesh burnt, and more putrid than a moat of refuse lying stagnant for weeks. Ned swore he felt
the grime of that monster’s flesh on his skin, even through leathers and furs. But any trace of it in the
sky was gone, even the trace of its monstrous shadow had faded into memory.

The god was gone, the monsters, and Sansa-
Sansa had done it.
But at the cost of her life.
Sansa was worth so much bloody more than that, than this.
Ned wanted nothing more than to scream.

“M’lord?”
Ned blinked the world into focus. His eyelashes were crusted with fresh frost from tears – the
evidence of them froze over before sliding down his cheeks. Ned fought against the shaking in his
legs and chest. It was foolish to hide the pain that wracked him from his men, he knew. It was even
more foolish to pretend as though he wasn’t affected. What man, what father, wouldn’t be affected
by this…?

Ned just didn’t want to fucking believe that he had to do this again.

Sansa, he thought as he stared at the knight who in turn was staring at him. Half of Ned’s
age, if that, with fresh scars that marred a once-pristine face. Why didn’t you tell me sooner. I could
have saved you.

“M’lord, they— they’re—” the knight stumbled for words. There was a stream of blood on his
temple, drawing straight through his frozen beard matted with ice and dirt. He looked lost. “What
should we do now?”

Ned straightened, flexing his fingers at his side. They ached, from the weight of battle and the
cold. It was still so cold, this far north, and this deep in winter. His men – dazed, but glad – began
creeping out from the forest, still ready for something to come charging at them. The longer they
didn’t, the lower their swords fell.

There weren’t as many as he hoped. Ned did his best to forget the smattered remains of his
dear Rodrick. To the knight: “Gather the rest of the men. Heal any who need healing, and burn any
who are d—”

Ned couldn’t finish it, but he didn’t need to.

The knight nodded, still dazed, but glad to have orders to follow. “Yes, m’lord.”

Ned nodded at him.

The knight didn’t leave though after that unsaid dismissal. He dug a boot in the snow, fiddling
with the loop of his swordbelt. “I—I’m sure we can find her.” He let the edges of his mouth rise in a
simulacrum of a smile, but the truth of his thoughts were write plainly. I’m sure she isn’t dead;
besides, that’s what you want to hear, isn’t it? That she’s alive. That she didn’t meet the same fate as
your Cat had all those years ago. At least this time, Sansa wasn’t alone, not really.

She is though, came the final expression of the boy in front of him before he schooled his
face.
Ned adjusted the cuffs of his gloves and coat, pretending to find them lacking in propriety instead of suddenly wishing the god was here again. Maybe one strike through the chest with Valyrian steel couldn’t kill it, but two, or three? Or cutting through its neck? Everything had a means to an end, surely that applied to gods, too.

He felt witches approached before he saw or heard them, the rush of wind pushing back as they flew down on their staves. The old witch in the south – Olenna, that was her name – told Ned how all that remained of Sansa had been her stave, shattered in splinters, the largest barely big enough to whittle a kitchen knife out of. But sharp enough to threaten her own life with (the witch recounted the story, more often than Ned would admit to forgetting). He kept them, every fragment. Bundled in one of Sansa’s cloak, left lying atop her made and cold bed. Because she would return.

She wasn’t dead, just like the god wasn’t dead. Sansa was here, alive, and damn all the rest of the gods if they took away his daughter, too.

Old Nan landed on the snow with a heavy crunch, her white hair awry beneath a displaced shawl. The younger witches kept up in the air, though some barely off the ground. Even with the magic coursing through their veins, they each looked as drawn and haggard as his men. Or, what remained of them.

“Can you locate her again?” Ned cut in, hardly giving the old witch more than three breaths to fix herself. There was only so much rearranging of cuffs, so much dusting snowflakes off his furs, before someone thought him certifiably mad.

Old Nan pursed her lips.

-curious –

Ned shook his head, and interrupted the witch (whose mouth was curling into that undesired No, I don’t think so). “You’ve done it, before. We located the god’s palace–” pointing to it off in the distance as evidence, “–surely you can do it once again.”

Did he look as desperate as he sounded? No matter. This was his daughter. Sansa wasn’t going to be the last thing the gods took from him until he would die in decades’ time. Because Eddard Stark vowed not to let that accursed god take her. Not when he was so close to saving her.

The witch took in a long, measured breath. Calculating her words as carefully as she could. “I can try. Though–” she motioned over to a pair of witches. To them, she asked, “Did you recall seeing the pin fastened on Sansa’s cloak? Or, whatever it was she’d been wearing?”

Jeyne and Silgard shared a glance, though there was taut tension in the look. Jeyne was the one to speak. “No, I don’t recall.”

“Bit of a fuckery up there,” Silgard murmured, but Old Nan let it pass. After what they dealt with, language was the furthest thing on their minds.

Old Nan kept looking at the younger witches, maybe wishing the same as Ned (Please tell me you’re lying, that you did see it, that it was there as clear as day). To Ned, she spoke. “The charm I placed on it will find it. Only, if it is not attached to Sansa…”

The only reason they had found the god’s palace was because the god had found the pin, lying in the middle of nowhere, Old Nan’s trickery working naught to keep the god off Sansa’s trail when they’d worked to figure out how to get Sansa out of her predicament. And it was luck that the god had kept it. And it had been an assumption that (like last time, or so Old Nan vaguely
mentioned) Winter would give it back to Sansa.

The god’s icy visage was wrought with possession as it screamed at Ned. *She’s mine!*

Ned couldn’t imagine the god giving Sansa her pin back, let alone giving Sansa back to Ned. But there had to be another way.

“I cannot think of it,” Old Nan answered, Ned realizing he spoke aloud.

* - mother -

Ned shook his head again. Hearing things, the sure sign of madness.

But, that voice wasn’t wrong. When Cat had disappeared, Ned sent out search parties tirelessly to find her. And they did – *too late* – but they had, and Ned was at least able to hold his wife’s body one last time.

*She’s here, I’m certain of it.* Where else could she be. They were still living and breathing in the world, a sign that Ned took to mean that Sansa was alive. Surely the god would have torn Westeros and the entire planet to shreds should Sansa been dead. Look what it did when he couldn’t find her! And imagine what he would do when she died.

Though, he acted different when he left Cat to die in the cold.

Ned shook his head again. Old Nan, at least, had the age on Ned to speak up. “It has been a long night.” Despite it being in the middle of the day, the sun angled in the center of the spotty clouds above. When had Ned last slept, a proper sleep? Likely before Old Nan told him the truth of what happened down in Highgarden. Years ago, when Ned had foolishly dismissed their hushed words as nothing more than witchy conversations. Oh, what a ignorant fool he was.

Though, if Ned were to be honest with himself, it was longer than that. The *first* time a messenger barged into his study with news that they found her.

Too long had Ned slept without the gnawing emptiness deep in his chest. The only constant in all of this.

He licked his lips, feeling each of the cracks beneath the clinging of snowflakes. His body suddenly dragged down, as if agreeing with the old witch. *Go to sleep."

But – and this was what kept his feet firmly under him rather than curled beneath – Sansa was alive.

He *knew* it.

He wouldn’t believe otherwise until he found her body, blue-lipped and paler than the snows she would be buried in.

But she wouldn’t be buried in them. Not this time.

“Help my men,” he said finally, nodding to all the witches present, and the knights close enough. “You are right: it’s been a long journey north, and a long battle. I can’t imagine what we need more than a roaring fire and a good rest.”

The knights present looked relieved, the witches too, save for Old Nan. She knew well enough the lengths Ned would go to to find Sansa. Her pursed lips said it all, even if she agreed on
resting.

“Let us help.”

Ned turned to the voice. It was Jeyne. She was barely aloft, and her eyes looked more sunken than the last time Ned saw her. Sansa’s friend, from long before Sansa even knew of the accursed magic that flowed in her veins the same as her mother’s. If anyone knew Sansa better than Ned it was Jeyne (and perhaps with the way Ned treated his daughter, she was right. The sourness of Cat’s death urged him to pull Sansa back into a *normal* life of being a lady).

The witch continued, even though he didn’t ask for an explanation. “In the sky, we can spread out further than you can on foot. If she’s—” she paused, nibbling on her lip. “It will be easier to find Sansa if we are looking for her above.”

Ned tilted his head. “‘We’?”

Jeyne nodded. “Me, and the rest of us on staves.”

The other witches nodded, slowly.

Ned called for one of the knights. “Bring me four good men and five strong horses.” Back to Jeyne, he asked again, “Are you sure?”

She nodded, and Ned wondered about the sadness that tinged her gaze. He swore he’d seen it before, in the looking glass. Regret. “Yes, my lord. I’m certain.”

It was long minutes before he heard the sure trot of horses’ hooves.

- love -

He nodded as the witches spread out across the sky, Old Nan included. They were slow on their staves, tired, but even still they didn’t want to stop.

And neither would he.

Ned kicked his horse to a steady rhythm, the *one-two-three* clatter of his men’s horses following suit. They sounded louder in the stillness – even the wind, whose sombre howling chilled Ned’s heart, had disappeared.

*I won’t stop until I find you, Sansa. Ned urged his horse to a canter. I will promise you that.*

* * *

Sansa blinked back the tears, surprised she could cry in death.

*Death.*

She was dead, gone. She expected to die saving her father’s armies, saving the witches, and saving the god – but even as she was flying through the belly of that monster, Sansa didn’t quite believe that she would. Especially as she shot through its singed side, breathing fresh air and disappointment that she had *failed*. A little bit of her said she should try again, said she *had* to try again. And she couldn’t try again if she was dead.

There wasn’t much to do as a corpse. Except for cry, apparently. The tears were neither warm nor cold, her skin the same shade of pale as the assumptions of clouds far above. She swiped them away with the pads of her thumbs, annoyed how quickly they came back.
A deep breath, one that broke several times on the way in. Slowly out, breaking only half as much.

Freeing her eyes of those blasted tears, Sansa looked at her new home for eternity. It didn’t seem as dark and horrid as she once thought (back when she was alive). Rather, around her there were trees, flowers, life. Sansa could have cried at that alone: the sight of flowers blooming, of trees heavy with fruit. Sparks of blues and reds and yellows against the dreary white. Each swaying in a breeze that she couldn’t feel, tinting the air with a scent she couldn’t smell but knew well enough from her endless time in Highgarden. It would smell like the summer season. The leaves moved slowly, as though this world was beneath water, fighting against the currents far above. The pinprick of sun above might as well have been through waves. If Sansa pretended hard enough, she was traipsing through the Wolfswood looking for ingredients for potions. Or she was wandering just outside Highgarden, enjoying the warm summer breeze beneath the silhouettes of trees, arm-in-arm with Margaery or even perhaps Jeyne. She could almost smell it, the richness of the earth and sweet suffocation of flowers with each breath of air.

Still, it looked familiar.

“You’re a curious thing, are you not?”

Sansa glanced back up at her mother, and the tears were threatening at her eyes again.

“I—” Sansa began, the words breaking worse than the gasps for air. *I’m sorry, mother. I didn’t mean to die the same as you did. I didn’t mean to leave father, and Winterfell, and everyone. I wanted to save them. I wanted to, and I didn’t.*

*I’m so sorry.*

Sansa could only hope they wouldn’t be quickly greeted soon. Eddard wasn’t the man to do such a thing, but Sansa recalled how mute he’d been returning from the cold with his dead wife (*my dead mother*). A silent prayer and promise to keep it from happening again. But it had, and all because Sansa, deep down, wanted to dance with the god. Wanted to earn his frigid affection, with each snowflake that rained over Westeros and each rose that bloomed for her. With each growing heartbeat in the chest of a god devoid of humanity. Oh, yes, she couldn’t fight against the truth, even in death.

“You did not cry the last time,” Cat said as her hands continued combing through similar thick auburn tresses. Sansa looked at her mother, wishing for words of *It’s not your fault*, but found none. Hoping to feel the soft brush of fingers clearing away the endless stream of tears. None of that was found, not when Cat added, “Does it hurt?”

*Yes.* Sansa closed her eyes, letting the soothing brush of her mother’s fingers lull away the ache in her chest. *So much, so so much. I wish it didn’t. I wish it came and took me away and didn’t make me feel a thing.* But her mother knew that already. Sansa replied with a nod of her head, feeling the strangling of words in her throat. They made it hard to breathe.

Still, she tried. Her words sounded so small, as small as she felt in her mother’s lap.

“You need not cry anymore, child” Cat said. Sansa quietly willed fingers to swipe away tears, but they never did. “There is no point in crying, not now.”

“Mother, I—” Sansa began, opening her eyes. Cat’s face was hazy through her tears, and Sansa half-remembered a smile when she first awoke (dead). The lips that met her were ever-so-slightly curled at one end, and those eyes.
Sansa couldn’t push the rest of the words out, choked as they were.

Because, this woman, her mother...

Those eyes that looked down at her were full of intrigue. Like the sort that Winter displayed when he inquired about frivolous human things, or when he tried to decode the meaning for the beating in his chest. Or even when he first saw her: even as nothing more than shadows and wind, Sansa could swear it had been there all along, highlighted by lantern light with the taste of fear on her tongue. Like he was fascinated by her, as much as he was curious. And somewhere between that, Winter had been in love, too, though he likely couldn’t tell them apart.

Such was the gaze that met Sansa. These eyes that looked down at her were fascinated and curious. And a deep, forest green.

Not Tully blue.

And the longer she stared at her – at the eyes full of curiosity, at the lips tilted in amusement, at the feel of fingers gliding through hair lighter than comforting (as if uncertain how to comfort) – the more Sansa realized the person above her could never have been her mother.

The woman had her mother’s (and her own) face, yes. But the woman was far from the mother that had perished in the snows because of Winter’s supposed love.

Sansa opened her mouth to say something to the god, but her throat was raw. Smoke and blood and ice coated the sides, and her mouth tasted like death.

“I always wondered,” her not-mother continued. The woman’s fingers were soft, warm, as she lazily brushed Sansa’s hair over and over. “What does it feel? To cry? To hurt? To die?”

Sansa didn’t reply, still struck by deceit.

The woman continued. “I heard it can be rather painful. Though, pain is…” she petered off. “Though I’m certain you could explain it. This is not the first time for you, after all.” And she smiled, so sweetly, as though she was talking of planting new flowers in the garden beneath her window, than death.

The god’s fingers stopped when seconds passed and Sansa had yet to respond. Five pricks of warmth seeped through Sansa’s skull as she stared up at the woman – the thing – that had stolen her and her mother’s face. Sansa hated herself for having fallen for the lie.

Her voice choked as she said, “What do you want?”

In return, the god’s smile tilted into a pout. Her lips were fuller, framed by soft, golden skin. “I believe I told you already.”

Sansa bit back her retort. It didn’t do well to speak to gods as though Sansa was the one in control. It didn’t do well to interact with them, at all, let alone speak to them, or touch them, or fall in love with them.

When she didn’t respond, Summer smiled down at her; not the smile of a mother glad her child learned the lesson that fire was hot, but the smile of an animal watching its prey. Waiting for the time to strike. “I am merely curious, is all. How you humans... feel, and so much of it, for having lived so short lives! I cannot imagine that.”

“It hurts,” Sansa replied.
Summer tilted her head the other way, dark eyes alight with interest. “What does?”

“Everything.” Sansa felt her skin prickling where the god touched her, but she fought against the urge to jump away. She had a hunch things would go less kindly that way. “Dying. But not as much as…”

The god leaned in, until there was hardly room between nose and forehead. “Do tell.”

Sansa kept her gaze on the god’s, even as she watched forests rise and fall in the depths of green. “Love.”

“Oh, you joke!” the god said, tossing her head back and letting loose a laugh. It trilled in the air, sounding how roses bloomed, slow and creeping but erupting into full beauty. “I am well aware of that emotion.”

So, she does love him? Sansa mused, not certain, especially with the way the god referred to it as something she might have collected, like a shiny rock. And not at all the writhing, aching thing that followed Sansa into her death, despite the heart to beat for it.

“It is a curious thing, love, but I must argue that it cannot possibly hurt more than dying.” Summer leaned back until the sunlight shone down between errant strands of her hair. It was all the seasons of leaves at once. “If so, why would any thing love when it could die instead?”

Sansa didn’t know.

“One day, he will learn.” Summed mused, tossing all of her season back behind her shoulder, which transformed from deep auburn tresses to tight fiery coils. Even her skin darkened to a deep brown – the appearance of leaves burning just before they fall to the ground and await the next turn of summer. “Humans cannot love us, nor can we love them. We are not the same, you and I. Perhaps your love hurts, but ours does not. It burns, and freezes, and transforms the world in our declarations: the rise and fall of lands, and storms, the creation and destruction of what we wish. But, no, sweet child. Our love can never be the same.”

Somehow, Sansa’s not-heart stopped beating again. She saw the snowflakes with her faces; and watched how they piled up around trees and stone, devouring everything in white. She saw the glacier carved in her likeness; and heard the fruitless cries of men and women and children as they drowned. She saw the roaring beast lumbering through the skies; and felt such emptiness as she flew through it, as though it sought nothing else but death.

She clutched her chest, fingers slipping through where part of it used to be. And good gods, it did feel worse than dying.

Summer looked at Sansa expecting to hear Yes, you’re right. Expecting to hear I am nothing but a foolish human, I never did love him, and he never did love me. And Sansa felt those words creeping up along her tongue, pressing against the back of her teeth.

But, the god was wrong, just as much as she was right. Gods and humans can’t and shouldn’t love one another as humans love each other, and even as gods love each other – that much was evidenced in at least their mortalities.

The aching in her chest was more. It was an outstretched hand in the middle of the godswood, blood-red leaves staining the snow and glittering roses wrapping around her feet. It was the facsimile of a smile as he watched her marvel at his gifts, as he listened to her explaining the banalities of human life. It was the dress he wrought from the stars, and the crown placed on her
head – all gifts. And more than more. It was the quiet *bu-dump* beneath her fingers atop icy skin. Winter’s heart *beat*, for her. A human heart in a human chest, but a body the god created for Sansa.

“He *does* love me.”

The words were out of Sansa’s mouth before she realized she *should* have reigned them in.

Summer’s hand froze tangled in Sansa’s hair. The god looked down at her, head cocked in the same uncertain manner that Winter would do. They were so very different – winter and summer, fire and ice, day and night – but so very similar.

*They’re gods.*

Even Sansa just admitted that they weren’t the same, that they couldn’t exist.

Summer’s hand grabbed a lock of Sansa’s curls, dragging her fingers through it to the very tips, until she reached the end. The hair bounced off Sansa’s shoulder, but she watched the god’s fingers continue their path down until she was creeping past the shivering bend of Sansa’s elbow.

She shivered, despite the warmth of the god’s touch.

“He *loves* you, you say…” Summer muttered as she trailed a delicate finger over each of the endless swirls drawn on Sansa’s skin. Sansa hadn’t looked at it properly, not since her breath was taken by the wolf’s fire exploding in the night sky. Or, in truth, before that: when Winter took her hand in his and led her through a waltz that lasted forever and only a heartbeat.

Snowflakes. At least a hundred of them, each a different size and each unique, wrapping around her forearm. They were paler than her skin, and turned silver in the sunlight. Her pale skin had pinked from the fire that consumed her, which only proved to highlight Winter’s marks further.

She couldn’t deny the beauty of Winter’s touch. Nor could she forget how brightly the marks shone when Summer had chosen to bestow her powers onto her. As though all the sun had been captured in the swirls of her arm.

Tucked between snowflakes were sunbursts, glittering gold amidst silver.

Summer’s hand was suddenly on Sansa’s chest, pushing against the gaping hole. Sansa cried out, but she couldn’t move. The god had her pinned, strength belying the soft frame she appeared.

“You humans are *fragile* things, are you not?”

Sansa wasn’t sure if she should respond, but knew she wouldn’t have been able to. Her teeth gnashed so tightly she feared they would shattered.

But that didn’t stop the god from pressing harder. “I shall never understand how he could confuse *me* for you.”

Sansa tasted metal where her teeth slipped and bit against her inner cheek. Her tongue tapped over the fresh bump. *Nor could I*, though thankfully her mouth kept shut.

“After all,” the god’s hand moved away from the gaping hole, and Sansa saw the skin slowly knitting itself back together. “I find myself to be much, *much* prettier than you, do you not think so too?”

“Yes, of course,” Sansa said through ragged breaths.
“And yet, there is no truth in your words.”

She wondered if the gods were capable of lying, or if like human emotions, the idea was foreign to them.

Summer let it go entirely, and Sansa could have sworn she’d seen the telltale pull of a smirk on the god’s mouth. Or maybe it was just the pain playing tricks with her brain.

And maybe it was the pain, too, that had her spewing through gritted teeth, “Did you kill my—” Sansa couldn’t say the rest, couldn’t even force it out through her lips. “Did you kill me? The last time I danced?”

Sunlight caught the god’s eyelashes, spun from the most delicate thread of copper. When she blinked, they shimmered gold. “I was curious if maybe you were like us.”

Left unspoken: But you weren’t.

Then why have you helped me, she wondered, staring into the god’s eyes that were now filled with as much rage as they were curiosity. Then why did you not leave me to die, all those times. Had Sansa not already knew that Silgard had fired the massive arrow at the dragon, she might have thought the god had something to do with it. Maybe she did.

The only thing that told Sansa it had truly been a stroke of sheer luck was that she was alive.

“Why did you—” Sansa hissed as Summer pressed against the opening again, “—why didn’t you let me live?”

Summer shrugged. “I thought to let you live, after all, you did not seem to love him the last time. But a swift death is as much a mercy as life, would you not agree?”

No, never.

Because Catelyn was smart. She snuck away from Winter, and was on course to return back to Winterfell. She would have made it to.

Ned would have hugged his wife’s warm body when she knocked against the solar’s doors. Not-

The god removed her fingers from the wound. “Though, I never expected you to return,” Summer added, dragging Sansa back to reality. For once, Sansa was glad of that. She looked up at the god, whose head was tilted again. “I was unaware you were able to come back, nor so quickly. I would have been more thorough.”

“Because he loves me?” Sansa spat. Her brain was too slow, fire coursing through her veins. Her mother died for no reason other than a jealous god’s whim. Her mother-!

Summer tsk ed, as though she really was a mother schooling her child. “Oh, no, little one. Not for that.”

Summer bent over Sansa, placing a gentle kiss on her exposed forehead. The god’s lips were warm, shooting waves of heat through Sansa’s body to reach even her toes. They curled, cold and forgotten. Sansa hadn’t realized how cold she’d been, not until the gentle caress of a midday breeze trailed between her ribs and her skin. Not until something tickled her still heart enough to get it to beat one last time. It left a heavy thump in the air, unbidden by the confines of her chest.
Against her skin, the god’s breath tickled, like the gentle caress of a morning summer breeze teasing the warmth of the day. Only, the shiver that snaked down Sansa’s spine was cold, despite the heat that crepted in between her skin and her bone. The juxtaposition made the shiver that much colder.

Summer spoke finally, her lips brushing against Sansa’s skin. “Because you loved him back.”

* * *

“Lord Stark!”

Ned whipped his head up, hood falling in the motion. Wind attacked his ears, his neck, sliding down through the smallest cracks of his cloak, beneath even the leather and the cloth to his very skin. *You can’t escape*, it said, with fingers probing through flesh, wrapping tightly to each rib. *You know the truth, stop pretending*. Creeping between bone to his heart, clutching it, tighter, tighter.

Ned’s fingers couldn’t work faster to right his cloak, even if the tips were growing numb. The wicked whispers stopped once it was back ahead. But the chill didn’t leave his chest.

How long had it been now? He lost track of time. It hadn’t been more than a few hours, he knew, and in that span he watched the sun rise and set and creep up again.

The sooner he could return back to Winterfell – no, just back south of The Wall – the better. Nothing good came of wandering through a god’s kingdom, even if Ned had yet to see it since it exploded beneath the weight of Ice.

For one brief moment, Ned thought it curious that the god of winter should have exploded beneath the weight of steel named after his domain. If only it *had* died...

Ned clasped the front of the hood with one hand as he stared upward at the growing silhouette. It was Jeyne. He nodded to her, watching as she descended down between the burnt arms of trees.

She looked no worse than when he said goodbye hours ago – good. Ned and his company hadn’t seen any things, either, which was only making the knights anxious. Between his legs, the horse snorted. If those things *were* coming back, the beasts would feel it first.

Ned turned back to the search party with him, a small group of four other men. Each were hunched down close towards their horses, with their arms wrapped tightly around leather and furs, teeth chattering. The beasts were shivering, too, beneath the piles of furs their men sat upon. Battle left neither man nor horse prepared for hours of searching through a frozen wasteland.

“Go back to the others,” he commanded, nodded in the general direction of where the rest of his men were resting. Ned knew it only because the largest spire of the god’s castle stood taller than the trees, even so many miles away through the thick throng of trees. It was a horrible monstrosity, but at least it proved useful.

This far, the trees were alive, sharp needles covered in thick layers of snow. One of the men’s horses scared when a mass of it fell just short of it, and they spent (or wasted) the better part of ten minutes convincing the man everything was alright.

To be fair, they all jumped a bit.

But further east, Ned saw the remnants of Sansa’s magic. Trunks scarred black. The flames licking hot enough to melt the feet-thick snow down to the very soil; earth that likely hadn’t seen the
sun since the dawn of time. This far away, at least the air didn’t smell burnt.

Ned turned back to the witch, who lowered herself to hover at his eye level. There was snow on her cloak, and a stray bit of red clutching to a frayed end.

“Where is she?” he asked, rubbing the tiredness from his eyes. He did his best not to blink too long or too often. Sleep was waiting for him, and he knew it would always win out in the end.

Jeyne pointed with a nod of her chin. “There is a tree, a big weirwood, not much far off. The cliff of it you can see from here.”

Ned had seen it – the only other landmark in this wasteland of snow. Far bigger than even the weirwood of Winterfell, whose blood-red leaves stretched maybe as wide as Winterfell was. Ned had been unconsciously heading towards it, as if even his very soul knew that’s where he was meant to go.

“I shall meet you there.” They were still several miles away, hardly an hours ride – if him and his horse were managed to stay awake and upright. He turned to call his men to head back-

“No, you shan’t.”

He turned back to the witch. She would have had her arms crossed, he knew, if Jeyne had the energy for it. She had to be at least as tired as he was. “How do you mean?”

“It’s…” she paused, biting the inside of her cheek. “It’s best we get there as soon as we can. Come, you can fly with me.”

He recoiled – in shock, in fear – but the logical part of him (that remained, despite the fatigue) knew better. It read the unspoken words in Jeyne’s statement: *It's best you come quickly, because Sansa might be –*

Ned maneuvered his horse around, carefully climbing off without making an ass of himself. Thankfully, his legs worked well enough not to tangle on the stirrups. A swift pat on its back had the horse trotting to meet up with the others. Facing his men who were still hunched over for warmth, Ned announced, “I shall continue alone, thanks all you for your help. See to it that you all make it back to camp, get some food and some rest.”

His men didn’t argue, only offering generic, “May the gods be good, m’lord,” before steering their horses back to camp. They deserved warmth and sleep as much as anyone else.

And now, there was the matter of…

Jeyne lowered herself down, feet just above the snow, and offered her hand.

Ned was skeptical of the witch – she was no more rested than he was, and Ned couldn’t say what the toll of using magic did to the body – but Jeyne played the part better than he did. Or maybe he thought himself better at feigning fatigue, at feigning fear. He reached for her gloved hand, but Ned was suddenly skeptical of her stave, convinced it would snap the minute she took off.

“You best hold on, my lord,” Jeyne said without looking back at him. Her feet kicked up off the ground, and Ned closed his eyes as he felt his own lose contact. Fear welled up in the pit of his stomach, screaming unease.

“But–"
“But I would rather you not go flying off the other end.” The witch did turn around at that. “My lord.”

He did as he was instructed, closing his eyes and placing his hands as gingerly as he could on her waist. It was an effort to balance on the stave, and Ned was thankful magic didn’t flow in his own veins. He would be glad to have a horse, or even his own two feet.

It hadn’t been far long ways, but the trees masked the height of the cliff. Each foot higher brought the weight in his stomach lower, until Ned was surprised he didn’t slip and fall from that alone.

Ned tried not to pretend it was Sansa he was sitting behind.

Or Cat.

“Just about there, my lord.”

Peeking with one eye first, Ned saw it. Red. The ground beneath their feet was red, specks of white visible only where their feet had disturbed the leaves.

Gingerly he opened his other eye. Ned’s gaze roved across the speckled ground of red, over to the massive trunk of the weirwood, stopping only when he found the face carved into it long ago. It was massive, ancient, and watching.

Ned wondered if it was Winter that the humans of old had prayed to. That even as Ned cursed at the god from behind the safety of Winterfell, or beneath the comforting branches of the bone-white tree in his godswood –

“You’ve found him,” a voice said, breaking through Ned’s thoughts. He looked down, glad to see the ground growing closer with each frantic beat of his heart. He was more than glad to feel solid weight beneath his feet, and did his best not to jump off Jeyne’s stave at the first moment.

Half of the witches had returned to camp, making poultices and potions to heal them. And come morning (true morning, whenever that was. A quick glance at the sky and it was already nearing the cusp between noon and evening again) they would burn all the bodies they could find. Ned had seen not just what those nightmares were, but who. Good men, armor and weapons clinging onto haggard frames eaten away by frost. Ned wouldn’t wish that sort of eternal hell on any of his men, not even traitors.

Ned had noticed first that Sansa was not amongst them. “Where is…?”

“Down there.” Ned looked to see Silgard, sitting atop one of the weirwood’s massive roots.

He approached, hand resting on the familiar and comforting pommel of Ice. “‘Down’ where?” He spun to look at Jeyne, who was already leaning against a root, too. She likely wouldn’t admit how much her body ached.

“Follow the path. It starts just around here. Nowhere else to go but down.”

Ned stepped around the bone-white roots – each were wider than he was, wider than even a horse, and yet still alive – to see the tell-tale path they spoke of. She’s down there… And these witches… “And you are not?” He turned to them again, feeling the bones in his hand tighten around his sword. “If Sansa is down there, should you two not be too?”

“It would know,” Silgard replied, a lick of flames (hardly the size of a candle’s) sprouted from
her palm. She didn’t say anything else, watching that small fire dancing along the tips of her fingers.

She didn’t need to say any more. Ned knew, had known, really. Descending, he was thankful of the weight of Ice strapped on his back, relieved at its comforting whack with each careful step down. He clenched and unclenched his fingers with each step, ignoring how stiff they were, ignoring how sore his arms and legs and everything was.

If it came down to another fight, then Ned would not let himself lose.

- you loved-back-

The path was narrow, following the face of the cliff. He hadn’t know what to expect when he finally reached the bottom, but it wasn’t what met him.

A garden.

In the middle of a frozen empire that stretched from one edge of the continent to the other. Ned marveled at it for as long as he could, curious more than anything:

He never visited Highgarden, but he imagined this was only a sliver of it.

Sansa was there, lying motionless beneath the largest of the trees. Its branches were heavy with lemons, their sharp scent faint beneath the sting of cold. And surrounding his daughter was a bed of grass and flowers – all made of ice.

More important was the blood, stark against all the pale white of her skin, her clothes, the snows surrounding her. It had poured from her chest like a macabre sunburst, each jagged trail of blood leading Ned’s gaze directly to the cause of it. A gaping hole, right through her heart. Ned daren’t look close enough to see if it pierced clean through – he knew it did, because of a single flower spindling up through her shattered ribs. Splattered in blood were petals made of solid ice.

He saw her heart beat. Or, thought he did, hoped he did. Just a flicker of shadows of the canopy above. So much red stained her skin and dress – a dress that Ned had never seen before. The few spots where it was unblemished by crimson, Ned spied sweeping swirls and twinkling snowflakes. They carried down to her arms, which were covered in soot and dirt where they hadn’t been burnt.

Gods.

*She can’t be alive*, his mind told himself. *Not with all that blood*. *Not with-*

The god was there, too. It didn’t notice Ned’s arrival, focus entirely on Sansa. It was hardly more than a shadow, kneeling beside her, one hand atop hers – but Ned knew.

Ned unsheathed Ice, the grating sound of it against the scabbard echoing in the small alcove. The god of winter, of death, turned at the sound. Without eyes, it stared at him.

He hefted the greatsword in his hands, ignoring the scream of muscles from the weight alone. He wouldn’t have much fight left, hardly more than one swing. But that’s all he would need.

*Revenge* clouded Ned’s mind, but he let it lead, sure steps toward the shifting shape of the god who did nothing but watch, stare.

Lifted his arms, shaking from the weight of Ice, Ned let his weight fall forward-
-spying the glisten of sun on the flower sprouting through Sansa’s chest: a rose–
-and stopped.

Because if he killed the god, he killed his daughter.

* * *

Sansa opened her mouth – to speak, to scream – finding grey smoke instead of voice escaping her lips. It tickled around her neck; slithered into the air, tangled amongst her hair.

She coughed once, twice, choppy clouds of smoke falling from her mouth. Sansa gasped for air, huge lungfuls, but all she tasted was soot.

*She’s burning me from inside.*

Sansa jumped, her legs wobbly. Summer was faster, grabbing Sansa’s arm and jerking her back down. “Oh, little thing! Where do you think you are going?”

“I-!” was all she managed before coughing up darker clouds of grey. The warmth that once tickled her toes was burning; her mind screaming to stamp the fire out, to roll in the snow, to do something. But what could she do when the fire was inside?

Sansa didn’t have an answer for the god, who didn’t want an answer really. Sansa just had the warning voice screaming at her to *Get away*, screaming at her to go *Anywhere but beside a god that wished nothing more than her own demise*.

Summer’s smile remained, but it was crooked. Where she held Sansa, her fingers were warm. Hot. Burning. Sansa yelped, more puffs of grey leaving her lips, as she tugged and tugged her arm as hard as she could. The god didn’t relent, only gripping tighter.

“You cannot leave just yet, sweet thing.” the god said, wrapping her arms around Sansa in a vice. The rest of her air escaped her body in a shaky grey cloud, and Sansa felt her lungs gasping for any bit of air. None came. Summer’s lips caressed Sansa’s neck, the illusion of breath tickling her skin. “I rather think you deserve a gift, don’t you?”

Even if she could manage the words, Sansa had no idea what was going through the god’s mind. A gift? For what?

Still: she knew it would have been anything but kind. Unless *this* was it. Burning Sansa alive, from the inside, as a thank you for something Sansa wasn’t sure she even meant to do. And she didn’t, hadn’t. Old Nan barely alluded to that night in the trees. Summer’s gift was for something Sansa never meant to do, no, but Sansa wasn’t sure if she regretted it.

At least, not until her father’s army appeared.

*Magic*, Sansa’s brain thought weakly. She could feel the fight in her limbs grow slack with each passing heartbeat. And soon enough, there wouldn’t be heartbeats left to count. Even her vision was turning grey.

*My magic…*

Sansa couldn’t tell which flames were hers and which were the god’s, but she tried to shove them out of her body. It didn’t matter, at this point. Sansa couldn’t *die*, or die again, or whatever the truth of this reality she was in with Summer. She *couldn’t*. 
She never said her apologies to her father.

She never got the proper truth from Old Nan, or Olenna, or anyone else.

She never told Winter the truth of her affection. The actual truth, not the one meant to make him think she loved him, or that he loved her. Because he did? Or didn’t he. Summer said they loved differently, but there was something between them that she wasn’t sure either Sansa or Winter knew what it was until he left her locked in a prison of ice.

Digging deep, Sansa collected each ember, each smoldering snake of smoke, prying them off from where they clawed into bone and muscle. They resisted her touch, recoiling as if knowing which of them was the true Summer. Sansa felt the arms around her tighten. Spots speckled her vision, black and white. Whatever leftover air she had left fell through her lips in ghastly greys.

She pushed the flames from her muscles and blood. Up against her skin.

Out through her skin.

Summer fell off her, caught unaware.

Sansa gasped for breath, greedy. Her lungs were on fire, her limbs too – literally. She tumbled forward, scrambling to get as far as she could. Some licks of flame sizzled out against the snow – it was biting, where she touched it. Colder than even she remembered it being.

Not a dream.

Caught between gasps and screams, Sansa dared to look back.

Summer was alight, but she wasn’t in pain. She was laughing, as flames licked up her arms and caught her hair. She was smiling, as she watched Sansa struggle to get away.

Maybe that arrow hadn’t killed Sansa, not completely. But Sansa knew Summer was more than willing to finish the job.

Her lungs were greedy for air, her skin greedy for the burning cold of snow. Sansa found a reserve of her magic, pushing it out through the air. A bolt of fire, no bigger than a bolt of steel. It soared through the space between them in a blink-

Summer swatted it away like a pesky bug. And laughed.

It was useless fighting fire with fire. Sansa’s magic was borne of flames, of flowers and life – the same things the god was queen of.

Her friends’ words snuck in between the fear pumping her heart: you are Summer.

Sansa was the god made human, and the god had centuries – millennia – more experience with her powers than Sansa had. And the entire universe to bend to her will. And a form that wouldn’t die as easily as a human.

“Oh, what fun!” Summer squealed. Sansa shook her thoughts back to the present, fingers digging into the snow beneath her. She watched the god disappear in a puff of flame, the snows beneath her scarred black. Even the snowflakes drifting lazily – as if unwilling to fall – burst into pinpricks of fire midair.

Sansa didn’t think, she ran. Her feet dug deep into the snows beneath her boots. Where she
was going, she couldn’t say. Anywhere, out, away from the god, who not only desired to *kill* her, but found glee in the challenge of the hunt. Three steps before Sansa spied a winding path carved in the side of the cliff face, and Sansa had a hazy memory it led to freedom somewhere. Her boots pivoted in the snow as she aimed for it, flowers destroyed beneath each step.

  *Fwip-*

Sansa felt sudden, blazing heat to her side as Summer reappeared, hands reaching out to grab hold. Sansa screamed as fingers wrapped around her arms. Worse was the smile carved upon Summer’s face: there was no way Sansa could mistake her for her mother, not in a million years.

Sansa screamed, her skin heating up until she could *feel* it start to melt away from her bones.

The god laughed, again, so light and soft. So at odds with what she was doing, with what she was finding humorous. And it was a stark reminder that he wasn’t *human*. Summer never created a human body as Winter did. Smoke and heat coiled into the vague shape of a body. Claws of fire extended from the illusion of human hands – skin in one blink and flames in the next. But her face remained, soft and perfect. With deep green eyes devoid of kindness. Her smile remained, and it made Sansa’s stomach churn.

“It becomes rather boring watching you humans strut around. I find it so much more *fun* when you fight back.” Summer let her go, not before leaving angry red handprints. The god was blocking the winding path up out of the alcove. There was a similar path behind Sansa, some hundred feet away, but she would never make it. A sheer cliff to her left, and a sheer drop to her right.

Sansa took a half step back, Summer copying her before her own boot crunched snow. Did her magic even work in this not-quite-dead world? Or had it vanished the minute that arrow pierced her heart? “Why?” she stammered out, taking another step back. “Why do you hate me so?” Even if Sansa knew plain as day the answer:

*Because Winter fell for me.*

*Because I loved him back.*

Did Summer do the same to her mother, to the other human woman that happened to share face with the god of warmth and growth? Only, Catelyn Stark didn’t love Winter, the same way Sansa did (she *did*, she knew. There was no point denying truths when she was facing death. Or, a second death).

Flames licked around Summer’s fingertips first before crawling up her hands like a million lightning bugs of glowing oranges and yellows. They climbed, higher, until both the entirety of her arms were engulfed in shifting, burning summerlight. The flames made her hair look alight, too; not kissed by the sun but strands *born* from the sun itself. Or maybe it actually was alight. “You danced with him. Not once – *once!* , i could forgive, as you had before, I know not how you silly human minds work.” She grew, fire exploding higher until she eclipsed the ceiling of the alcove. “But *twice*! You danced again , and told him you love him!”

*I didn’t the second time!* Sansa wanted to shout back.

But there had been a third dance. And *that* dance...

Did the god see the kiss, too?

Summer licked her lips, mouth parted just enough to reveal teeth. They were too pointed to be human’s, and too big to be any beasts’. “No matter. You shall not dance with him again, or love him
again. He. Is. Mine.

The words echoed Winter’s.

Winter may have fallen for her – and hard – but she never should have loved him back.

Even if…?

Summer unleashed a torrent of flames.

Sansa leapt to the side, tumbling through the snow. Her leg fell down against nothing. Sansa jerked herself away, the ghost beating of her heart quick. Wind tore up from the drop below, so cold in contrast to the heat blazing a line where she had been moments ago.

Sansa covered her face with her arms, biting down hard on her lips to keep from screaming. It was hard enough before she tasted blood, and felt her lower lip go soft and slack from the heat.

Peeking through closed eyelids, she saw the god blind to Sansa, only where Sansa had been. The assumption of her mouth was angry, angrier than angry. Strands of hair turned upward around her head like a sunburst made real.

Snowflakes filled her vision, and they were glittering silver.

*If I am the human form of Summer*, Sansa managed to think, trying to figure out something before Summer realized she was burning nothing and turned her aim on Sansa. At which point, Sansa would melt from her bones, or she would find solace in whatever lay at the bottom of the cliff.

*And Winter loved – loves – me*.

Summer’s heat was cooling down. Seconds (if that) before the flames flicked away enough to not reveal the charred remains of Sansa.

*And if I gave him a heartbeat*.

Summer’s wrathful glee as she watched the winds tear through the smoldering garden. Nothing in its path survived. Even the tree’s canopies sparked, turning into bright, burning truths of the turn from summer to winter, nothing but golds and oranges and reds.

Painfully, Sansa stood, not daring to look at the mess of her body left on the melting snow.

Her legs wobbled, Sansa slamming her feet into the ground to keep atop the cliff. She didn’t want to test how far the drop was. Nor did she to test whether she truly was dead or alive.

*Sansa*, a voice called.

She hefted an invisible sword in her hand, feeling the weight of it, relishing in the cool relief spreading up her arm.

It cut through the swath of flames separating them.

The flames disappeared.

And the god still stood, her face angled at Sansa.

Summer turned to her, disappointed written in the flickering flames of her face. “I’ve grown rather bored of this snow,” Summer trilled out. Her voice was sweet, soft, even if the malice in what
she had just done – what she had planned to leave Sansa as – countered it. “My sweet Winter has declared himself king of all the land we allowed you humans to walk on. King without me.” She pouted, and maybe it was meant to be charming. Sansa didn’t find it anything of the sort. “I do love him, but he thinks too highly of himself. And he rarely appreciates all the flowers I paint this earth with for him when I leave. The brilliance of my world, washed up beneath his snows. Grey and white with barely a lick of color.”

Sansa – had she not just died and been looking at the god who wanted to kill her permanently a second time – would have found Summer’s musings interesting. The secret life of the gods, beings immortal and far away from the reaches of humans.

Too bad she wouldn’t live to share it.

No. She shook her head to kill the thought. I won’t die, I can’t.

“Ah, but then again,” Summer continued, loving the sound of her own voice. She had been wandering back and forth, pretending to be oblivious to the human she was about to hunt. Maybe if Sansa stood still enough, the god would talk herself into forgetting about her. Or maybe as a kindness, Summer would let Sansa plummet to her second-death, instead of melting her alive. “You claim his devotion for you. I cannot imagine he would so easily relent the snows. No, no. I’d rather imagine him to tear the earth apart should you die again.”

So much for being invisible.

“Yes,” Sansa agreed, finding her mouth dry. She tasted smoke on her tongue, and tried to ignore how deep the god’s fires burned inside her. “He would.”

Sansa.

From the corner of her eye, she glanced at the gathering of burning trees – they cast shadows, tall and dark, shifting beneath the flames. Just shadows.

Back to the god.

“As much as I loathe to agree with a human, I must concede the truth in your words.”

Sansa breathed slowly. One shot, and even that had a slim outcome of her surviving. She might as well throw herself off the cliff and be done with it.

“But,” the god continued. A finger of fire crossed the gap between them, caressing Sansa’s check in a soft warmth that she had to fight to keep her body from buckling towards. “Who is to say when I will get the chance to watch my sweet Winter writhe in –oh, how do you humans call it? – heartbreak?”

The finger birthed six others, wrapping around Sansa’s throat. It lifted her up, pulling Sansa towards Summer as quickly as it was burning her throat. Her mind was screaming, but there weren’t coherent thoughts anymore. Maybe her mind had given up hope that she’d survive, too.

“Hm, yes. I’d love nothing more than to break your heart. Will it taste as sweet as my love thinks so?”

A separate hand shot out from the god, tickling up her body until it found the torn edges of her chest. Crept into it. It was nothing but flame and smoke, but Sansa felt solid fingers wrap around her heart. It was still beating, so faintly.
But for how long?

“İ–” Sansa managed, willing whatever last drop of magic she could from her body, even as it was being burnt from the inside and out.

*What does it feel*, Summer’s words trilled. *To cry? To hurt? To die?*

“İ–” she repeated.

Summer’s grip on her heart stilled, pulling Sansa in closer. “Yes, child?”

Sansa could barely see the god through the spots in her vision. She lifted her hand up, hovering over the fiery arm that loosened just a fraction around her neck. Summer was a god, was all-powerful, and she was curious. “Does it hurt, little one? To die?”

Meekly, Sansa shook her head. Her hand twisted towards the god-

“I-love-him–"

-ice shot from Sansa’s palm straight through Summer’s face.

The god shouted, an unearthly sound to match the shrieking of glaciers cracking and falling into the sea; to match the pained squeals of animals being torn alive by prey bigger and more vicious; to match the howling of winds and raucous thunder as storms rage and rage and rage.

Sansa!

The last bit of wind fell out of her lungs in dark grey gasps as she fell to the ground. Melted snow water burned against exposed flesh, but she could hardly manage a scream.

She could hardly manage to move, to run.

She had proven that that something existed between her and Winter.

And now she was to die.

Sansa!

A trick of the wind.

Sansa!

She looked, to humor her mind.

Beneath the burning trees were shifting shadows. One of them looked to have a hand, ushering her towards it.

Sansa ran for the shadow, her legs collapsing with each pained step. There was no way of knowing if it was truly her father, Winter, anyone willing not to kill her. There was a niggling thought that it was a figure of smoke wrought by Summer herself; a trap.

Sansa would die staying here regardless. She picked up her pace, crashing into the charred flowers, slipping on the melted snow. And listening to the howl of the god behind her. The same *fwip* as before, the rush of cold as the fires extinguished in one heartbeat.

The shadow remained.
If it Winter was there to pull her back into life...
Or drag her to her final death...
She lunged for the shifting shadow of his outstretched hand-
-feeling flames licking around her feet-

* * *
-Sansa gasped for air. It was thick and sweet, filling her lungs until she thought to explode from it. The world smelled like it was burning. Or maybe it was just her, and she finally was dead. Dead dead, no more of being toyed by the gods, but properly dead.

She didn’t want to open her eyes.

She didn’t want to know the truth, not this time. Tears were already pricking at her eyes, and she daren’t wipe them away for fear they weren’t real.

For fear that none of it was real.

Arms were on her before she could look around.

_Summer-_!

She had gone through, too! Unsatisfied with letting her prey slip through the cracks between reality and not-quite-reality. The arms were warm, and Sansa didn’t wait to let them heat her until she was nothing but a charred husk.

Sansa screamed, shaking them off.

“Sansa!”

“Let! Go!” she screamed, feeling the rawness of her throat. Her tongue was dry and coated in grime. And through her writhing pleas of escape, she was crying. Proper crying, the tears warm against her frozen cheeks, snaking down her neck, too, as she pulled and pulled out of Summer’s grasp.

Sansa willed the same wintry magic to shot forth from her body. Even as she tried, she could feel her veins depleted of magic. _No_. Her last effort failed, and now she was to be tortured by Summer again for an eternity.

Gods, she should have jumped off the cliff.

Sansa felt faint, weak, but she didn’t stop thrashing free. Or trying to.

“ _Sansa_ , please, _stop !_”

The voice was rough, deep, and familiar.

_It’s_– She maneuvered around in the grip and pressed her face against furs.

Her father smelled cold, like he’d been standing watch the entire night through, and for far longer than his words would admit. But he smelled familiar: like newly-smithed swords and softened leather and ice. Like her family, and her home.
Please don’t be another illusion.

“Sansa.” he whispered, squeezing her again in a crushing embrace. “I’m so– I’m–”

Free of the torrent of adrenaline that had her sprinting towards reality, Sansa was struck with tiredness. (And yes, this was reality, she knew it in the bitter cold that tore at her ruined dress). The winds in the other world didn’t feel as heavy, as biting. And her father – no god could fake him, his voice, the feel of his arms wrapped tightly around her.

Sansa’s legs crumbled beneath her, but her father was quicker.

She leaned forward to rest her head in the crook of his arm. Faintly, she felt the pounding pulse of her father’s heart – excitement at finding her, and finding her alive. A blessing he hadn’t had had the same privilege over a decade ago.

Except… Sansa didn’t feel relieved, not entirely. Her mind kept saying Summer was seconds from charging forth from whatever half-reality she held Sansa in. Though her father’s embrace had flattened the wind from her lungs, Sansa in truth hadn’t much breath left to hold. She’s coming right now! screamed her brain over and over despite the quiet in the alcove.

But with each passing heartbeat – with only their heartbeats, with the swaying of leaves, and the whistling of wind far below – that voice quieted.

“Father, I–” she began, her voice muffled against his arm. She half-hoped he wouldn’t hear her. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Winter approached. Sansa couldn’t see him – smothered as she was in Ned’s embrace – but she felt the cold touch of his skin against her own, fingers asking for permission before lacing with hers.

When she pried herself away, Ned looked – for lack of better words – disgusted.

“Father, I–” her voice croaked, and Sansa could feel the tell-tale prick of tears growing again at her eyes. She pulled herself from her father’s grip (though her body ached to stay in the hug for forever), leaving her hands palmed over one of his. Winter’s hand was gone, replaced upon her cheeks. Thumbs gently froze each tear before he swiped them away. “Father…”

I love the god, too.

Ned stared at her in disbelief, her unspoken words clear. “What is the meaning of this, Sansa?”

That disgust was there, clear as day. But disappointment. The same as when she practiced magic after her mother had passed. Sansa hated it, and hated how she felt like she did all those years ago: so small, so helpless.

But she wasn’t.

She wasn’t.

Sansa took in a shuddering breath, and the heaviness of it had her coughing. “Please, father, don’t…” What? Kill him? Sansa wasn’t sure a human could kill a god, even if they wielded Valyrian steel. Ice lay at her father’s feet. And Winter’s own ice was there too: an entire field of roses, wrought for her, the largest of which sprung up around the lemon trees. They looked much better green and full of lemons than bursting in flames.
“Is it true, Sansa?” her father began, though his eyes remained on Winter. “Tell me, the truth of it.”

“I…” She bit her lip. Sansa hoped (in the ballroom, high above the snows, for a day or two to figure out how to make peace between them. She hadn’t expected to do it so quickly, and just after dying). “…yes.”

“Sansa, why.” Ned’s hands were on her shoulders quicker than she expected, and his no-question hung in the air. Sansa looked at her father, and felt not just the disgust and disappointment, but the fear.

“Please, father, I… It wasn’t him who ki– killed mother.”

“It is.”

“No, please, it wasn’t–”

“Get your hands off her!” he roared at Winter, though Winter did no such thing. Sansa felt his cold fingers wrap around her waist, gently tugging her towards him as her father kept his own hands firm.

“She belongs with me,” Winter countered, and Sansa chanced a look at the god. He was wearing his human skin. But, it wasn’t skin. He had to construct that of all of the things that made a man: iron and gold and lead. This was the same illusion Summer wore: human enough, should she think the god was human. But inhuman enough that Sansa spotted the cracks where skin joined at the neck, wrist, even around the eyes. And his eyes, gods.

When he looked at her, she saw how blue they were.

Tully blue.

“She’s my daughter,” Ned countered back, and in any other situation that would have worked to back off arrogant suitors. But if the arrogant suitor was an old god who was not accustomed to not getting what he wants?

“Father, please,” she pleaded, breaking herself free of both their grips. Sansa looked her father straight in the eyes. For once in a long time, Sansa was thankful how identical she looked to her mother, because in the following silence she watched her father understand something:

Sansa wasn’t Catelyn.

Nor was Sansa dead.

She licked her chapped lips, tasting how dry they were from the agonizing clutch of Summer. Or maybe they just felt that way. She was glad they were attached, they were solid. Sansa shivered at the memory. “Please. Let me talk with him for but a moment. I shan’t leave you again.”

Maybe it was the setting sun, but Sansa thought she saw pricks of golden tears forming beneath her father’s grey eyes. He’s scared, she thought, she knew. He wouldn’t have traveled all the way through the unknown wasteland beyond the Wall had he not been.

Ned’s hands were shaking, too.

“I will come back to Winterfell, father, I promise.” Her chest pained – at the prospect of finally seeing home again, or at the idea of leaving this world of ice and snow – but Sansa couldn’t
pinpoint why. “Truly. I need to speak with him. To...settle things.” To cement her promise, Sansa
leaned in and gave her father a kiss to the cheek. His stubble tickled.

She turned then, even as she saw questions forming on Eddard’s lips. Later, she told herself. And later had been her excuse the first time. Once back home, she knew she had to tell the truth of what happened. To her father, her friends, the witches. At least, as much as she was willing.

Winter had been silent all the while, but Sansa saw the same sort of burning questions aching to spring forth. Maybe she should have deigned to let her father speak first, but it was too late for that.

“I...” she began, suddenly realizing she had no idea where to start.

Winter looked at her, curious, his startling blue eyes catching the fading light. They matched the veins snaking beneath his skin, and Sansa had to pull her gaze away from them. “You... are human.”

It wasn’t a question.

Winter didn’t move, in body or expression. He was waiting for her reply. Still, Sansa suddenly felt a fraud. She felt bad for it, even if it was technically Winter’s misjudgement of her that led to all of this in the first place.

She nodded quickly. “Yes.”

“And yet, you look like a god.” His head tilted, and Sansa saw streaks of light break through the illusion of his humanity.

“Oh, the god looks like me.”

Winter didn’t understand, but Sansa shook her head. As if she understood all of it, either.

“We are...” he began, resting a hand over where his heart should be – had he been a human. Winter was at as much a loss for what to say, but Sansa knew (or, hoped) he was wrestling with the same intangible mess of feelings. “...how to say...”

“She–” Sansa cut off, remembering Summer’s irascible flames. The feel of her hands burning her, melting her away. She shivered. “She wanted to kill me.”

Winter blinked, but he did not look surprised. “She is...not fond of my affections straying.”

“I...see...” Sansa had thought there would be more to it, but she supposed even the gods had their own issues with emotions. How often did they love, truly? And did they love one another, because they loved one another, or only because Summer was the only other thing that knew – that was – what winter was, and they fell into each other because of it?

That made Sansa feel just a fraction better.

She lifted her hand, watching the shapes catch the fading golden rays. Now this was less explainable. “I have...your powers.”

Winter took hold her her hand, his cool touch shocking her. “And I have this.”

Gently, Winter lifted her hand up to his lips, placing not-quite-a-kiss to the back of her palm, with lips that weren’t lips, but they still felt warm. His mouth lingered a heartbeat before guiding her
hand down to rest over his chest.

Sansa gasped.

It was still beating, faint, but there.

When she tore her gaze up to meet his, Winter was already staring at her. He licked his lips, and spoke (quiet enough that her father couldn’t hear, even as he was eavesdropping). “You took from me, and I from you. It is a...most curious arrangement.”

*Curious* didn’t begin to explain it.

“So, I…” *I took part of your godliness, and in turn you took part of my humanity.*

Winter nodded, acknowledging her unspoken understanding. Well, *understanding* was an understatement.

“How have you finished?”

Sansa jumped, surprised to see her father still there. He was leaning against a tree, his body showing evidence of age and fatigue. But arms crossed and an equally crossed look on his face said he would fight against as much sleep as required to get to the bottom of this.

Winter stood beside her, his fingers brushing up against the back of Sansa’s. She didn’t let him intertwine his fingers, not this time. Not *before* she sorted things out. If that was even possible. But Winter spoke before she did, “Are you...her...?”

“Her father,” Ned asserted with a half step forward.

Gods couldn’t understand families, but Winter had to understand the not-quite-possessive way her father announced himself. She let it go, if only for the pain Sansa put him through these past months– no, *years* (gods, that was going to be interesting to get used to).

Winter looked between them. Dusk sat heavily on the world in deep, burnt oranges and browns, the sun greedily taking back all of its color. The god was more shadows than man, but his presence seemed bigger.

Sansa felt fingers beneath her chin, lifting her head up to look at Winter, whose tilted head was a position she had come to cherish. He was unfathomable, powerful, and merciless – and yet, he was as curious as a child, and as gentle as a lov–

“You love him, your...father?”

Sansa nodded.

“And,” Winter continued. *Don’t make me admit it again, please*. “You love me?”

If he hadn’t been a silhouette of a man born from wind and darkness, Sansa would have thought Winter was smiling at her, and not entirely out of mirth.

Sansa nodded, again. She felt the burning of her father’s glare on her, and maybe even the burning glare of all the witches (Old Nan, especially) staring at her from wherever they were. Certainly they felt a shiver at the admission. Sansa was suddenly aware that they *weren’t* here, and was suddenly afraid of having to tell them the truth.

There wasn’t going to be an easy way out of it, she knew.
“I would love nothing more than to keep you here forever, my sweet,” Winter continued, brushing his thumb against the length of her lips. Sansa was surprised at the urge to kiss it, to open her mouth and let him in. But she held back, for her own sanity, and for her father’s. Maybe Ice couldn’t kill a god, but in the hands of a father jealous that his daughter is about to be taken away by a scoundrel (even if the scoundrel was an immortal who willed snow and winds however he wished)...

“Sansa promised to return to Winterfell,” Ned butted in, as if to reminded Sansa not to make a foolish bargain. As if she would.

(Because, she realized, she could have. It wouldn’t have been her first).

“Then it is settled.” Winter removed his hand, from her chin, roving down her shoulder until he lifted her hand up to his lips and placed a soft kiss to the tips again.

Ned stepped forward, but his presence didn’t deter the god. “What is?”

“An arrangement.” Winter continued to stare at her even as he talked with Ned. “Her love is split between the two of us. And as much as I would love to keep her and make her mine completely—” Sansa blushed, she knew, because his hand felt even colder than before. She didn’t even dare look at her father.

“Fret not, my sweet Sansa,” Winter whispered, leaning in to place a kiss upon her forehead, one more gentle than the one he left upon her hand. His mouth brushed against her skin, his voice tickling. “We shall see one another very soon.”

Chapter End Notes

[The story concludes in the epilogue!]
**the dance**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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EPILOGUE

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A troupe came to visit Winterfell not a week after Sansa returned. Rarely did they venture so far north, preferring the warmth below The Neck. The master of the dance – in his motley of bright greens and golds, contrasted against deep blues and blacks – only cocked his head at the Lord Stark when asked *Why* they traveled all that

“It’s a tradition, m’lord.” The bells sewn around his chest jingled. “One we’ve, ah, forgotten to carry to your castle, m’lord, for fear of cold. But fret not! We shall make our amends starting now!”

Sansa crossed her fingers beneath her skirts as her father nodded his (uncertain and quite dubious) consent.

The dancers set up in the courtyard, though there wasn’t much to set up. The dance in Highgarden often had trestles of food and drink, and games (for children and for gambling) to better everyone’s spirits as they, well, ate and drank. The dancers themselves were modest, comprising of dancers, musicians, and the simple instruments. It wasn’t so much what they brought as what they did.

Sansa watched them as she leant against a stone pillar. She was still weak, needing the support of the column, and feeling only a little dizzy. Overall, she was faring much better than she was yesterday, proving herself well enough to come outside and watch the dance. It took six days before she woke up again in a familiar unfamiliar room, with streaks of dusk shining the dust.

She smiled when she woke (said Old Nan), and Sansa wouldn’t admit it was because it had all felt a lovely dream that ended sweetly – just like all the stories.

And then the weight of bandages on her chest, and the headiness of potions in her veins – Sansa jumped up remembering *it wasn’t a dream at all*.

She had fallen for a god, and he had fallen for her.

Or the other way around.

At this point, Sansa wasn’t sure if it mattered.

Something poked her back, whispering, “Don’t go jumping in the dance again.”

Sansa startled – at the touch, and at the shiver shooting down her spine – turning only to find a ratty mess of brown hair standing higher than she was accustomed to. “Arya!” Swatting away, but too slowly. Her sister only laughed.

It was *strange* seeing everyone older. Nothing drastic: streaks of grey where there had been deep browns and blacks; scraggly beards on boys who were now old enough to be men (though the thickness of beards varied), to the point where even *Bran* looked older than her; new litters
rampaging between feet, not stopping to the shouts of names Sansa didn’t know.

Everything was just off enough that Sansa pinched herself more often than she would admit in hopes that the last months (or years) had been a fantastical dream. She only had a plum spot on her thigh to tell her it wasn’t.

There was dirt smudging Arya’s knees and palms – at least some things never change. Sansa pursed her lips at her sister. “I shall try. Though, you have my permission to yank me back should I feel the temptation to dance again.”

That lit up Arya’s face. “For certain?”

Sansa shrugged, not entirely warm to the mischievous look in her sister’s eyes. Gods knew Arya would throw dirt and leaves at Sansa to dirty her dresses...at least, she used to. Arya was technically the older sister now, even if she was still inches shorter. And even if she still acted the same as before Sansa left.

Sansa was rather certain her feet wouldn’t betray her this time. After all, she never once joined the throng of the troupe watching the Summer Dance down south. The fun and rhythm were contagious, yes, but Sansa stayed carefully out of the way of the dancers. Still, having Arya did calm the nagging unease that she would make a fool of herself. She combed her fingers through her sister’s hair, trying (and failing) to make a semblance of the knots. Sansa only succeeded in yanking out some strands to Arya’s swatting hands. “Yes, for certain. And perhaps I shall yank you away when you fall to the beat of the dancers, too.”

“As though you could pull me down,” Arya challenged, and maybe it was the clouds that had Sansa seeing worry in her sister’s face. She’d never seen a dance of the seasons, only heard the stories that Sansa brought back along with sweets and gifts every Winter’s beginning. And knowing the vague story of why Sansa had disappeared for five years must have had Arya worried enough to fear that she could succumbed to it, too.

Sansa grabbed hold of Arya’s hands, surprise on her side, and held faster despite her sister’s tugging. There were new scraps lining Arya’s hands, and new lines of scars. Before, Sansa would heal her sister before they walked the path back to Winterfell to keep the truth of their playing away from their parents. At first Sansa’s heals were shoddy, jagged lines (which sometimes made the cut look worse than it actually had been). But she got the hang of it when it came to small scraps and tears like this. Sansa trailed her thumb over a nasty looking thunderbolt striking between Arya’s second and third knuckles. Arya snuck a sword from the armory when she was not even ten, and convinced herself she was good with it. She was good at sneaking past the laborers and even their own father to Sansa’s room, where she tried and failed for minutes to close the wound.

It had been one of the first times Sansa used magic.

Along with cuts was dirt beneath nail-bitten fingernails. Arya would never admit (not in public) that she’d been worried sick for years about where Sansa had gone, and what happened to her, and if she suffered the same fate as their mother. Arya may not have inherited the magic or the looks that Sansa did, but she had a heart brimming for love for her family. She just chose to show it atypically.

Sansa shot small tendrils of magic around her sister’s knuckles, knitting the scraps away until there was only dirt left. She then leaned against the pillar, pretending casual when really that bit of magic had her head spinning. “Go wash your hands, they’re filthy.”

Arya pulled her hands back. To emphasize her unspoken No, she summarily squatted down.
and smacked them against the floor, a cloud of dirt following her back up. Always keen to do what she shouldn’t, especially if it involved anything involving running around, getting dirty, and swordwork. “You cannot tell me what to do. If you’ve not realized yet, I’m the older sister.

“If you want to be the older, then you can start by doing all my chores…”

That brought a pout to her sister’s face. With the mess of her hair and clothes, she hardly looked Sansa’s (technical) senior. She couldn’t help but laugh, which only worsened the growing crease between Arya’s eyes.

“Just you wait,” she said, snaking around the column until she had free reign to jab at Sansa’s back again. Sansa swatted her away. “If – no, when – I spy you dancing along to the troupe, I’ll give you a good enough tug you’ll age forward to Old Nan’s age!”

Arya slunk away between bodies, and as Sansa turned back, she realized the crowd was growing in the courtyard. It wouldn’t be long before the dancers began. Sansa saw them warming up on the side, laughing about somesuch.

“I hope your sister is right.”

Sansa didn’t have to turn to see Old Nan standing beside her. Her stave looked battered, the witch, too. Old Nan looked her years, yet she stood just as straight as Sansa.

“I promise I won’t turn as old as you,” Sansa began. “Besides, I don’t know if there’s a number big enough for that.”

Old Nan didn’t laugh, not out loud at least. “And about the dancing…?”

“I promise,” Sansa began, resting her head against the cool stone. “I shan’t. Besides, I haven’t the energy to go jumping and skipping around. I would hardly make it to the edge of the crowd.”

“Hm,” the old witch mused. “And here you told your father you were bounding with energy….”

“And here I am telling you not to tell him.”

They were quiet for a while, watching streaks of white and grey shifting against a bright, brilliant sky. Sansa still hadn’t got used to the colors of summer: the deep greens of trees, and lighter greens of endless meadows beneath; blues and purples and yellows of flowers, swaying against gentle breezes; and the warm blue above, an endless sea, broken by the sun leisurely making its path across the sky. The days seemed impossibly long here, compared to Winter’s kingdom. All of it seemed so unnatural, but it was natural.

Old Nan finally spoke, “Did he love you, do you know? In truth?”

Sansa didn’t know, not really. After her conversation with Summer, Sansa knew even less about the wills of the gods (and of a particular god who had yet to make an appearance. And Sansa was fine to keep it that way. Old Nan had a theory that both Winter and Summer had (in a way) claimed her, but because Winter’s emotions were stronger, they won out in the end. Of course, there wasn’t another case to compare it to, and so it was all speculation). She liked to think he did; but liked to think he didn’t, too. Things would have been much easier had Winter never fallen for her all those months ago. Or, years...whichever.

Only, the second half of Old Nan’s questioning was left unspoken: Did you truly love him.
Sansa didn’t know that, either.

No, she couldn’t love an ephemeral being who brought the frozen winds crashing down from the mountains to freeze each thing they blew over with a single touch. No, she couldn’t.

But yes, she did. She truly, truly did, feeling the answer in every beat of her heart.

As though privy to her thoughts, the whorls on her arm tingled. Sansa shoved her arm behind her, hoping it wouldn’t catch the sunlight and shine.

“The gods,” Sansa began, fumbling for the words that stayed a jumble in her throat. They matched the thoughts in her head. “They feel emotions, like humans, er, like we do. But they have no filters to stop them from growing. If they love, or hate, or envy – anything – they do it completely, with their whole being.”

Old Nan absorbed her explanation, thoughts whirring as she stared at Sansa with narrowed eyes. There were new wrinkles lining them, and others breaking up her forehead. Even her hair looked whiter, like snow. “Like the storm it unleashed? And all of its... gifts? Because it hadn’t known anything else?”

Sansa wasn’t sure how else to convey it, choosing only to reply with a simple nod and a “Yes, of sorts.”

The older witch mused on her not-quite-answer. Sansa knew a thorough questioning was on the horizon for after Sansa’s body recovered properly. From the closing hole in her chest – a harrowing thing, one that Old Nan vowed to personally attend to as an unspoken apology for the things she said and did. And from catching up in time – Sansa needing to make up for the five years she lost. And she wondered how long the next season would last...

“Have you made your decision yet, child?”

Sansa was surprised it was Old Nan changing the subject, but no less glad of it. Sansa idly traced her fingers over the markings beneath her dress sleeve, wondering if Winter could feel her touch. Yes, it was for the best they changed topics. “I have.”

Seconds passed. “And?”

“I...” she nibbled on her bottom lip. “I think it would be best for me to stay here for the summer. Or, for the first half of it. Although, a trip to the south would be good. I don’t think I can recall the last I felt a proper summer sun, or ate the sweets in Highgarden.”

Old Nan nodded at her jape. “Yes, yes. Oh, and Margaery’s been faring well.”

Sansa nodded. Her friend had sent word by raven each year Sansa had been away, each more frantically worried than the last. Old Nan collected them (and read them, Sansa could tell from the discoloration on the parchment. The other witches down in the South taught her how to open and re-seal letters well enough to know Old Nan had been nosing. If only because she’d been holed up in Winterfell trying to discern how to find Sansa, and how to keep Winter at bay). Margaery was well, bruised. Perhaps Sansa was only avoiding Highgarden to keep from the no doubt earfuls she’d get from Margaery and Olenna and everyone else, even as they hugged their Thank the gods you’re alive.

“I’m glad to see her soon.”

“And I’m sure she will be glad to see you, too.”
“Yes.”

Another peaceful silence between them, and Sansa closed her eyes as a gentle breeze whipped around her hair. Old Nan spoke, her words just shy of a whisper: “Promise you won’t keep it to yourself. It doesn’t do well to hole it all up inside.”

Sansa knew she had to tell her, not for the sake of other humans being lured by the affections of a god. But because they both had kept truths, which led to much more pain than necessary. Many more deaths.

That, and there were tomes needing rewriting, and only Sansa had been privy to the inner workings of the gods, even if she didn’t quite understand them. Summer called humans curious, but the gods were just as mysterious.

“I shall,” Sansa promised.

“Look now!” Came a booming voice, silencing the murmurs in the courtyard.

“Look now, I implore you, upon the dancers!” the master of dance announced. Today, he was wearing colors as bright as the season: a motley of blues and reds and yellows, patchworked as though wove random squares together in the dark. A comely face, and a booming voice that caught the attention of any in earshot. There was a modest group in the courtyard, most people idling working through their tasks whilst keeping an eye out on the festivities below. Well, hardly festivities. The booths Sansa had become acquainted with the Summer Dance were more crates stacked beside each other with more tankards than food.

“It is with grave heart I must confess that we have failed to perform throughout all of Westeros. Most especially here, in the kingdom named for a god himself,” he continued, twirling on his feet to look at all the people gathered. The bells on his shoes twinkled. “But no more! We shan’t displease the gods no longer by lack of visiting the North and its lovely faces. And might I confess: Winterfell has the loveliest faces this side of the Narrow Sea!”

There was a burst of confused applause. Sansa wished she was among the crowd in the South: they cheered every sentence of the master, heckling him when he didn’t kowtow to the gods enough. The louder the crowd and the more ridiculous the prayers, the better the crops in the coming season. Or, so the rumors said. Maybe it was a rumor of the performers; better to earn gold with a lively (and drunken) crowd.

But she was smiling nonetheless.

“Strike up the song,” he called to the band, turning with open arms to the crowd. “And let us dance the summer to stay!”

Sansa felt the echo of the first beats like she had all those weeks – or, years – ago:

Clack clack clack

Aided by flute and string, trilling their notes between the solid thwacks of the dancers as they jumped and spun and – thwack – smacked their sticks against the ground. And the bells of the master, twirling around the edge of the gathered circle, urging them to clap and cheer and dance along.

Except, Sansa heard only the hypnotic beating of the tune.

Clack clack clack
The bright midday of Winterfell – its throng of people and animals, the sturdy stone and plain wood, even the peek of red leaves beyond – fell away to the shadow of pitch night. One by one pricks of orange burst into life, and beyond them, shadows of trees reaching up to caress the darkened sky.

Sansa was standing on the edge of the lanterns again, feet tapping to the beat of the dancers’ moves. Or, maybe she was tapping to the beat in her heart, a rhythm that she could feel throbbing against her chest, her head, even echoing down to the very tips of her fingers. As though the beginning of the world began at the first thwack of the beat, bringing forth humans on the second thwack.

And in the third: Sansa saw them, shadows, ushering her forward into the circle of lanterns.

She took a step.

A blink, and Sansa found herself back in the courtyard.

She watched the dancers jump and twirl to their beat. There were flutes and strings, too, a small band providing song to the performers. Smaller than the shows Sansa watched in Highgarden, with the heady scent of flowers filling the scant space between bodies lined around the performance.

“Come now,” the master of dance called to the performers. He was weaving in and out of the troupe, stepping in as a dancer stepped out, round and round the two lines like a ghost searching desperately for its lost body. The master was one of the six, but he was also someone else entirely. “The lovely lady of Summer,” he began, spinning another round through the dancers. His words were spoken in the quick quiet beats between the clacks, louder than the instruments and even the pounding of feet. “Ain’t no god half as beautiful as thee, with golden hair and kindness abounding.” Sansa coughed at the last bit, choosing to keep quiet, even as she spied Old Nan look at her from the corner of her eye.

“Forgive us our misstep,” the master continued, “and grace us with your radiant beauty! Honor our dance for you with a warm and prosperous season!”

Sansa thrilled to dance along. It wasn’t because of the Winter Dance (it wasn’t, she told herself). And though she wished to jump around in place like some of the others, she forced her body still. Mostly worried Arya would make good on her promise.

Still, she let her feet tap to the rhythm.

The dancers jumped, spun, tossed their sticks between each other, and landed down with a resounding crash. And again, and again, never once a step out of place.

And in the gap between the dancers, Sansa saw them as she did all those nights ago.

Swirling and shimmering, invisible unless one was looking.

One person, and then two, twirling and dancing and spinning in tune with the humans they wove between. Though this troupe didn’t leave a spot for the gods, the gods didn’t seem to mind.

And Sansa did her best not to mind, either.

Back to the dancers, to the master, the musicians. But Sansa found her gaze constantly wandering back to the gods.

And she swore she saw the shadow of a smile.
A dancer leapt in the way, beating his stick against the stones hard enough to crack the wood. He juggled the halves, calling for the master to toss him a new one, which he began to juggle too. He jumped and spun and leapt, not once losing any of the sticks.

The master called for the other dancers to do the same, and he tossed each of them sticks to juggle, too. None of them dropped or misstepped. The crowd cheered and laughed, and someone tossed an apple. The dancer plucked it out of the air and continued.

When the space was cleared again—save for the faint outline of the gods—Sansa smiled back.

A wind tore through the stone columns of the courtyard, tossing up hats and skirts. It tasted of rage and fear, of salt and citrus. She wondered if that’s what her lips tasted to the god, as his once tasted frozen and possessive. A second wind wound through, lighter than the second, reaching up the graze along Sansa’s mouth. She brought her fingers to her lips, tracing the shape of them as she remembered a starlit night filled with shifting rivers of galaxies and stars above. Winter looked more ethereal than ever, caught in the midst of bright blues and magentas and greens. But his eyes, slowly tinged with her Tully blue, and his lips, warm from hers, and his heart, beating softly in tune with hers.

Winter was most human then as they kissed.

Sansa tore her hand away from her mouth before Old Nan saw.

Oh, there would be plenty kisses again. Once winter’s chill wound down between the crumbled gap of the Wall, soothing fields laden with heavy crops and a world tired of sleepless nights sticky from the sun.

But for now, summer was here again. And Sansa was home.

Chapter End Notes

[And so ends the story of Sansa and Winter.

I’m so proud with how this turned out, not just the chapter but the whole story overall (even if these last couple were pretty long...oops!)! And I’m so /sad/ to have to say it’s finished :( But all good things must come to an end, and I hope this story has been a good (maybe a great?) one for you!

So: THANK YOU, from the bottom of my heart, for making it to the ending! Seriously, you’re awesome! :O I never could have finished any of my stories without all of your love and support along the way! :*

Also, if you haven’t, I’d recommend listening to the songs that popped this story into my head nearly two years ago (!!!). Of course, I’ve deviated from the source book (eventually), but 100% give a listen to the Wintersmith album by Steeleye Span! “You”, “First Dance”, and “Crown of Ice” are great. “The Dark Morris Tune” is the song of the winter dance. “The Making of a Man” is the poem that urged Winter to become human. “The Summer Lady” is the emergence of summer finally after too long of ice and snow. Great folksy stuff, and they’re all bangers tbh]
Okay, enough rambling. Thanks so so so much once again, and do feel free to leave your thoughts; I love reading them! :) ]

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