The more it takes away

by Ruta

Summary

Jon rests his forehead against their intertwined hands. She feels something wet pressed against her fingers. In the end, in a broken whisper, which fully expresses a piercing conflict, she hears, "I don't want to be king."

It seems impossible to breathe around the lump in her throat. Somehow she succeeds. She stroke his hair and her whole being gives way to the sweetness of this touch. She thinks, *when was the last time you let someone comfort you like this? When did you know this kind of love, you who as a child were hungry for caresses that no one has ever given you? You who have never had a mother?* It seems so unfair that someone like Jon, so worthy of love, has received so little of it in his life. Yet every love, small or large, short or lasting, has its own relevance.

(Inspired by old leaks about a possible Sansa's abduction)

Notes

I wanted to finish it before tomorrow's episode. This the first part of two.
Chapter 1

It's a sunny day despite the freezing air. It isn't snowing. The breath condenses in front of him, a sign that despite everything, he is continuing to breathe. He feels his lungs on fire, as if he's underwater.

The walls are high and thick, with wooden posts built upon the battlements, on which tens of scorpion bolts are placed.

Cersei Lannister is on one of these. She has a smile that drives him to leave the ranks of soldiers and advance towards the closed doors of the city under siege. It spreads fear and threat of terror. A chilling dread.

His worst fear materializes in the glimpse of red hair behind her. He wants to scream. Instead he remains paralyzed with horror, the only noise being the pulsing buzz of blood in his ears. It's like Rickon, only a thousand times more devastating.

Jon watches her approaching Sansa, slow and predatory, sharp and calculating. He watches how Cersei caresses her cheek with her nails, then grabs her chin and whispers something into her ear.

Sansa's face remains expressionless, but her eyes tell another story, betray what she really feels. Gods.

Sansa takes a step forward and from the way she moves no one would guess she is about to die. She will not beg nor she will run away. She has no chains or handcuffs.

Her eyes are incredibly blue, her hair a flaming mass. When she speaks, her voice sounds stentorian across the clearing.

"I will die like my father. I have no regrets except one." Her gaze finds his, liquid and sad and fierce at the same time. A ferrous taste invades his mouth. He has bitten his lip. "The north remembers."

The sword swings, the head falls, the body with it. The last spark caught by the sun of copper hair, streams of warm blood, the terrible sound of the thud.

He screams at the top of his lungs. And through him so the direwolf and the dragon and -

He sits up with a start. He's in his tent. It's still night. He rubs a hand over his face. He is soaked in cold sweat.

It was just a dream. A nightmare.

Sansa is safe, in Winterfell. He made sure for it to happen.

He closes his eyes and shreds of images run through his mind. No matter how hard he tries, he can't delete them from memory. Deep roots like those of a heart tree are wedged inside him.

After that night, it becomes a recurring dream. See her die, night after night, again and again.

Despite his attempts, every time something inside him seems to break and the craving for home becomes agonizing.
"They had to be full of water and instead were empty! How is that possible?"

Of all those present, no one speaks. Tyrion stirs by the queen's side and Varys remains inscrutable. Davos exchanges a look with Gendry and takes a step forward.

"With all due respect, my lord, Gendry and I were in charge of filling them," he says. "We can both confirm that they were full when we delivered them to Gray Worm."

Jon closes his eyes. His hands are locked around the table on which the map of King's Landing is deployed. His knuckles turn white. When he stares at Gray Worm, he finds him in his usual position, next to Daenerys, with his arms crossed behind his back.

"You ordered them to be emptied," he accuses him, but his voice sounds more tired than really angry. "Why?"

Gray Worm doesn't so much as look at him. When he speaks, he turns and looks at the queen, as if the presence and opinion of others are of no relevance to him. "That woman is like the Masters and we will treat her the same way."

Daenerys doesn't respond, but her face shows the same hardness that she hasn't lost since Missandei's death. She puts her hand on his elbow.

Jon thinks about Mance Rayder. Burnt alive is something he wouldn't wish to anyone, not even to his worst enemy.

The plan was to burn a small portion of the Flea Bottom, a displaced area and according to reliable sources now uninhabited, and at the same time to launch with catapults barrels of water to extinguish the flames. A play to show the devastating power of a dragon, the threat behind the warning, and have mercy, give a clear message that they are not the true enemy, but that they could become one.

To do something, quieting the desire for bloodbath of the Unsullied.

"What about the women and children who could have died?"

Gray Worm doesn't blink. "There are always casualties in war." Everyone knows that he is referring to Missandei. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Tyrion flinch under Daenerys' glare.

"You knew it?" He brutally asks her.

Daenerys's eyes catalyses on him, losing some of her coolness. She hesitates, as if evaluating the options. "No," she says.

Jon nods, trying to mask the relief he is feeling.

"So it's insubordination," he says gravely. From the way she is staring at him, Jon senses that she has already figured out what this means.

"I respected you as commander, but what you did today was unforgivable. We can't fight a war if we don't trust each other."
When they are alone, Daenerys’ fury is incandescent. "What do you think you're doing?" There is a ferocity in her eyes, the look of a bear mother to which were killed all her cubs, one after the other. "Gray Worm is my commander, a trusted man of the queen."

"He disobeyed an order! What example would we give to the other commanders if he remains unpunished?"

"I will not punish him just because he sought justice."

"That wasn't justice! It was revenge! If we start acting this way, what makes us better than Cersei Lannister?"

He knows he has convinced her when he sees her shrink under the weight of that umpteenth loss.

He would like to comfort her, but as a coward he turns his back and leaves.

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"My queen, we were willing to follow you and serve you to the ends of the world." Gray Worm is kneeling in front of Daenerys, like a loyal, faithful subject. "We did it. I can reach her now. Will you bury us in Naath?"

The queen's eyes are shiny and she is pale as the moon while she nods and promises to fulfill his last wish.

After Gray Worm dies, Daenerys remains, staring at his lifeless body.

When Jon approaches, she turns around. Her braids are ruffled by the wind and the hardness has reached her eyes. He immediately realizes that he has lost her fully.

"You can't force a dragon to behave like a sheep," she murmurs and her fury is blinding, mixed with grief. "At dawn I will set the city on fire."

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Jon enters the queen's tent last. It seems to him that only a few moments have passed since Gray Worm's execution. He tried to talk to Daenerys, but she took off with Drogon. He spent the last few hours among the ranks of soldiers, organizing water supplies with Davos.

When he enters, silence falls like a sword. Every gaze is fixed on him, every word truncated while it was spoken, each head turns and between them stands out one of a bright red.

Jon blinks and thinks it's a hallucination, an illusion due to the lack of light in the tent lit by candles. But the head remains red and the face is just that of -

"Tormund? Why are you here? I thought- That we would never see each other again."

Tormund embraces him, a proud and bone-breaking hug. When he lets go, giving him one last pat on the shoulder, Jon notices his grim expression. The smile dies on his lips.

"I couldn't let anyone else tell you." His hand remains firm on his shoulder. Something cold and
slimy grabs him by the scruff. "We were one day walking towards the North when your beast reached me. He was covered in blood. I went back immediately, but it was too late."

His mind is a whirlwind of alternatives. Winterfell burned to the ground. Sansa, Arya and Bran killed -

"They took her, boy. Those fucking bastards took your sister."

"Which of the two?" Someone asks.

He and Tormund snap their heads to their right.

Tyrion raises his hands, as conciliator as usual. "It's a legitimate question," he defends himself. "Jon has two sisters, Lady Sansa and Lady Arya."

"Sansa," Tormund replies in a grunt. His grumpy voice seems to come from far away. "She's the one they took."

Sansa. They took Sansa.

"Why? What do they hope to achieve?" asks Davos.

"An interesting question mainly because it provides multiple answers," intervenes Varys. "They could use her as a hostage. Or simply exploit her name. Let's not forget that she remains the key to the North."

Sansa has been kidnapped. At this very moment she could be at the mercy of Cersei Lannister. Suddenly his stomach is twisted and his vision blurred.

"Jon-" begins Davos.

"He is a bastard," Varys interrupts him without half measures, "and unless the queen doesn't legitimize him as she did with the bastard of Robert Baratheon, the only legitimate heir that can continue the lineage are her and Lady Arya."

Jon forces himself not to think about Sansa, the thousand ways she could be tortured. Her wounded and swollen skin, her piercing screams of pain.

There is a sudden silence, full of tension. He has recently started breathing again normally when he meets Daenerys' gaze. It contain pity, but also something that he cannot define, as if a light illuminates it from within. "Family names are handed down from father to son," Daenerys states. "We're not in Dorne."

"Not necessarily," Varys contradicts. Daenerys finally looks away from him. "There have been cases, your grace, when no male heirs were available. Also in your family."

"So what's the plan?" Davos questions. "Obviously we cannot proceed as originally agreed, not now that we know that Lady Sansa is within the city."

He is obviously referring to the old plan, the one that provided for localized fires, for closing the access to the sea. To win the war by exhaustion.
Most of the men are waiting for his word, but he looks at Daenerys, at her lips curved downwards. He's shivering inside.

"I don't intend to change our strategy."

For a moment he is sure he has misunderstood. He must have hear wrong. He realizes this isn't the case from Davos' obvious discomfort, Gendry's disbelief, Tormund's confusion and the exchange of glances between Tyrion and Varys.

"What are you talking about?" His voice sounds hoarse and harsh. It's the first time he speaks. Anger blooms in his chest like a flower of fire. Makes him almost feverish. He feels less powerless. "If Sansa is in there, is all the more reason not to set the whole city on fire."

Daenerys's face doesn't change expression. "I'm sorry for your loss, but your sister is brave. I'm sure -"  

He won't let her finish. He doesn't want to hear. "Out." He doesn't scream, but the tone he used doesn't leave other possible interpretations. It is a mandatory, imperative order. "All of you. Leave us alone."

They do as he said and passing by Tyrion stops near him. He seems to want to tell him something, but in the end he closes his mouth and shakes the head.

Left alone, he turns to her, blinded by a black fury. "If you think I'll let you kill my sister-"

"She's not your sister."

"She's my family," he growls.

She raises her chin and there is a quiet determination in her, a plea and a need, something that shakes him deeply when she says, "I'm your family too."

"So did we get to this point? Do you force me to choose between Sansa's life and you?"

Daenerys approaches and when she rests her hands on the sides of his face, he feels the strangest of sensations. They are familiar hands, whose touch he should recognize. It isn't so. "I ask you to choose between the future and the past."

He feels drained, as if he had been deprived of something. He doesn't even know what it is. Only that it is of fundamental importance. "You're wrong. You can't choose between the two. There's no future without a past."

"So you're choosing her."

He grabs her wrists and sighs, before gently turning away from her. "There are other ways to take the city. Safer ways."

"Slower," she replies, frowning.

Jon can't tell her it's not true. "Righteous."

He has one foot out of the tent when her voice reaches him. "Do you think she will be treated with
respect? All say the opposite. Even if you could save her, think of the state in which you will find her."

He squints his eyes painfully. After a moment he leaves.

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"We can save her, little crow. Your sister is Ladyluck after all."

He looks optimistic, but it's a farce.

LadyLuck. He doesn't remember the moment when Tormund started calling Sansa that way. He would like to remember.

Kissed by fire, he thinks. But that didn't save Ygritte.

"If you're going to throw up, just do it now."

Jon keeps staring at the fire. "Everything I did, I did it for them," he mutters. For her. "I said goodbye to my home, to my family to protect them and now-" now she will never know why he did it. She will always think that he has turned his back to the North, to her.

"How could this happen?" Where was everybody when it happened?

Here they are again. Disappointment, frustration, disgust, outrage. He wants to smash everything to smithereens. He clenches his jaw and throw a log of wood into the fire. There is a high flame before the wood begins to crackle and burn.

"The she-wolf was gone a day after you. I thought I would find her here. The giant woman has disappeared so they must have taken her too."

Therefore Sansa isn't alone.

There is still something that is consuming a corner of his mind. "Tormund. You said that Ghost reached you. Wasn't he with you?"

He scratches at his beard. "He never left the castle."

"Why?"

"She has a way with words." Tormund shrugs and grins smugly. "All she had to do was to shed a few tears from her pretty blue eyes for the damn beast to run into her open arms."

Jon frowns. Why Sansa should care-

Tormund knows him well enough to understand what he is thinking. "Are you fucking kidding? The girl loves your beast. When you were stuck in the South they were butt buddies. Didn't you know?"

Something seems to compress in his chest. "I asked him to protect her in my place. I had forgotten."

"You forgot enough, didn't you? Do you remember who you are?"
Yes, he thinks and it has never been more true.
Sansa is retiring for the night. She is in need of rest. She will try to sleep, but it will be a vain attempt. Every time she closes her eyes she sees the wights again, only that they have the faces of Jon, Arya, Bran.

They move their lips to pronounce incomprehensible words, faces the color of snow and chalk and eyes that look at her without recognizing her, with hatred and anger and the desire to kill.

She has just been in the kitchens talking to the cook to arrange the next day's meals, verifying the state of the supplies, having given a huge portion to the army marching towards King's Landing.

For a moment her feet hesitate as if facing a fork. Usually she would have spent a couple of hours in the godswood, but it was a busy afternoon. Maybe a little fresh air will help relieve the slight circle in the head, will reconcile her sleep. She decides to go to the walls.

She's alone. Arya left a day after Jon and in the last few days Brienne has trained day and night the new guards - boys, little more than children, too young to participate in the last battle of fire and blood, but old enough to learn to defend what is theirs.

Ghost has gone hunting and Bran is at peace with himself, immersed in memories that distance him from the present, making him almost a living ghost.

She's alone.

Realizing it, she's assailed by the strangest of sensations. She can't explain it. Loneliness is not new to her. It has the ancient flavor of known things, like the warmth of mother's caresses, the embrace of father, the sound of the voices and laughter of people who still haunt her dreams with bloody appearances from time to time.

She is alone and realizing it, look around and know that this, this could be her future life, leaves a bitter taste in her mouth. She knows she is ungrateful. She is alive, she survived. It should be enough.

Not yet. Because what she has always wanted, since the very beginning and especially in recent years, wasn't simply a home, but a family.

Now her family is far away again, fighting a war because bound by honor and duty.

Sansa finds herself hating the words of her family, the qualities that make them honest and incorruptible in the eyes of the seven kingdoms, so easily blackmailed. A Stark is honorable and serious. A Tully is respectful and diligent. However honor doesn't warm a bed on the cold winter nights. Honesty doesn't protect you when they decide to cut your tongue because the words and secrets in your possession are considered too dangerous. Being good, courteous, courageous and strong doesn't prevent your heart from breaking when you are forced to see the man you love while he leaves to follow another woman.

She has almost reached the walls when it happens.
Distracted as she is, weary mind, and weary heart, she doesn't notice the shadow lurking in an alcove.

A hand grabs her by the waist, blocking her arms and before she can scream to call for help her assailant also stops her mouth.

"Sorry, pretty lady," a voice whispers in the dark. "The wind shifted again so I think I will have to win my castle by bringing another trophy to the queen."

Then comes the pain at the base of the neck and the world dances in front of her eyes sinking into a black sea.

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When she regains consciousness, she is on a horse, her hands tied. Behind her there is a man who she knows well, with an arm around her waist and a crossbow in his right hand.

"Ser Bronn," she mutters, speaking with difficulty. Every thought seems hard to grasp, like a trout in a stream that she is trying to catch with bare hands. Her body feels heavy and detached and her head - she groans softly.

He grins at her. "Slowly, pretty lady."

"Speak to Lady Sansa with respect, you fucking bastard," someone intervenes behind them.

Ser Bronn stops the horse and makes him turn in the middle of the road.

Brienne is riding a second horse, her hands tied in front of her. A long rope dangles between the two animals, forcing the second to follow the first and adapt to his pace. She has a black eye and a split lip. She doesn't seem seriously injured, except in her pride.

When Sansa meets her gaze, Brienne's blue eyes dart towards the crossbow and Sansa's suspicions become real. The odds that Brienne was defeated in fair combat were minimal. In an unfair confrontation, on the contrary, one in which her life was used to negotiate her surrender, it makes sense.

"You know," says Ser Bronn, "I think I understand what he likes about you now. With a sharp tongue like that. Even if in the end it wasn't enough to keep him in your bed. He ran to fuck his sister again." He grins, broadly and sarcastic. Brienne's sorrowful face is reason enough for her. Sansa nudges him in the side, to which he reacts by shaking her strongly. He doesn't hit her. Not that it really makes a difference.

"We're your prisoners," Sansa says. She hasn't felt such a corrosive anger and contempt for a long time. It makes her mind as clear as a early morning. It invigorates her. "But you will treat us with respect or you will bring two corpses to your queen."

He evaluates her. "You're bluffing."

Sansa doesn't look away. Both can imagine what Cersei wants to do to her. "A quick death is preferable to a slow torture."

"I don't think so," he comments. He no longer looks at her like she's a pie put on the table at the end
of a long day of work. There is a new appreciation and traces of amusement. When he takes a lock of her hair and sniffs it, Sansa remains perfectly still as she hears Brienne cursing between her teeth and wriggling over her saddle.

"You're a rare thing. The queen will know what to do with you. What do you think your brother will do in order not to see you do the same end as the foreigner woman?"

Against her will, her heart emits a thud. Discordant notes of acrimony and love. So that's the way things are.

This changes everything. Every previous escape plan evaporates from her mind.

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They untied her hands, but replaced the rough rope with heavy wooden handcuffs. They didn't offer any sort of comfort. The difference, compared to the last time she was forced to walk across those corridors, to kneel in front of the iron throne, is obvious. Once she was a girl and a hostage of war, now she is a woman and a prisoner.

She kneels and doesn't try to get up, but looks at Cersei Lannister with her chin raised. She is not afraid. Whatever she has in store for her, she has already suffered it.

Cersei observes her from the throne. Her chin is resting on one hand, her head slightly tilted. She has changed, her golden beauty is less striking and more pointed, but Sansa finds the same cruel smile like venom, the same resentment she had become used to.

*If you want to kill me, I won't let you do it on your terms. If I have to die, I will of my own free will.*

"You can't kill me," she says.

"Not yet," agrees Cersei, "but in the meantime we can find so many pastimes."

Sansa doesn't blink. *I stand here without fear because I remember.* She remembers everything. She already did it once, she can survive a second time. This is her victory, their defeat. Cersei doesn't scare her. Not anymore.

"I heard your last husband was a brute. Under that dress your skin doesn't have to be a pretty sight."

Why does she hate her? What has she ever done to deserve all this grudge? The only reason that comes to mind is - "Is it for Joffrey?"

Her change is immediate. The smile freezes on her lips. She gets up and down the steps, moving in front of her. Sansa knows what to expect so she is not surprised when she slaps her. "Don't you dare to say his name."

Even the taste of her own blood on her teeth is nothing new. "You know it wasn't me."

"But you wanted to." Cersei grabs her by the hair and her face is so close that she can sense the stank of the wine.

With a firm voice, licking off the blood with the tip of her tongue, she smiles serenely. "Yes."
Cersei's grip doesn't soften, but the violence that makes her eyes shine like wildfire seems to subside. Slowly she lets her go. "You have grown up, little dove. Now you have fangs and claws."

"She will win. You should have run away when you had the chance."

"I divided her forces. Why do you think I had you kidnapped?"

"You want to affect Jon."

"Your bastard brother," Cersei corrects her. The insult is clear and the word hits her deeply.

"Jon will not come. He will do nothing to antagonize the dragon queen."

"You're still naive." The confidence in her voice would make anyone tremble. But Sansa saw. She knows Jon. "He'll come."

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Jon enters the tent and unintentionally overhears a conversation that, on balance, regrets to having listened almost immediately.

"I wanted it just for a girl," Gendry is saying to Davos. They are again discussing the issue about his refuse to accept his new title of Lord of the Stormlands. "But she doesn't want it so why should I still want it? I love her and that's why I won't force her to be something she doesn't want to be."

Davos seems to disagree and is about to reply, but Tormund beats him on time. "Are you talking about the she-wolf?"

Here, this is precisely the moment he begins to deeply regret. He rubs his forehead and gives Tormund a dark look. Arya?, he mouths. When did it happen?

Tormund rolls his eyes. When you were busy at - and completes it with an obscene gesture.

Jon clears his throat. Gendry gets quiet, but doesn't look particularly guilty. There is no time to talk about it now, but once Sansa is safe and sound, he promises to have a long chat with him. Arya is a woman, but she will always remain his little sister.

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Tyrion's cue on the secret passages inside the Red Keep has been precious, but without the guidance of someone who knows them it can turn out to be a useless information.

Jon is coming to terms with the reality of that admission when the opening of the tent is pushed back and Jaime Lannister enters.

"I will help you," he says and that are his greetings. After briefly sliding over those present, his green eyes point to him. "I'll help if you promise not to kill Cersei. Don't misunderstand. She'll be dead by the end of the day." Jaime smiles at him, but it's a smile full of shadows. "She's my sister. Wouldn't you do the same?"

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The plan is simple. Precisely because the mission plans not to attract attention and speed is essential, the group will consist of four men. Apart from him, Gendry, Tormund and Jaime Lannister.

Finding out where Sansa is kept turns out to be more difficult than expected. Not even the keeper of the prison is sure where she is. The queen likes to personally take care of her pastimes. Jon lets Jaime Lannister stab him in the throat and then steal his keys.

For practicality and because nobody has a better idea, they go through the narrow corridors of the prison, starting from the first level.

When they arrive in the middle of the third, Jon regrets his promise to Jaime Lannister. All he wants is to pierce Cersei's heart himself.

They just closed a cell. Inside there were two corpses in an advanced state of decomposition. Two women judging by their clothes. Their expressions, one of fear and the other of despair, still haunt him four cells later.

"What kind of fucking sadist can do such a thing?" questions Tormund. Even his face, in the smoky light of the torches, appears whiter than the milk of giant of which he always has a stock.

Jaime Lannister doesn't turn around. "When you lose everything," he says, "losing your mind and becoming a monster seem tempting alternatives."

It's in one of the last black cells that they find her. The cell is completely immersed in darkness. As in the others there are no windows and the solid wood door prevents light from entering from the corridor.

At first they think it is empty. They are about to leave, but then what he first mistakenly confuses for a draft attracts his attention.

Passing the torch to Tormund, Jon wanders blindly to the corner and when he reaches the bottom instead of meeting the cold and hard stone of the walls, his fingers touch soft and warm flesh, long and tangled hair that gets caught between his fingertips. Without thinking twice, he draws that tall, familiar body to him. He feels her wiggle in his embrace, but when he blows her name like a prayer into her ear, he feels her relax against his chest.

Shaking hands graze his jaw, run his face greedily and her voice is little more than a crackling whisper when she says, "Jon?"

He must pry up every bit of self-control if he doesn't take her back in his arms. He let her touch him and in the meantime thank all the existing gods, old and new, who gave her back to him, let them find her.

Tormund approaches, enough for him to be able to distinguish the outline of her emaciated face, her chapped lips.

Sansa instantly shields her eyes and Jon moves to protect her from the light.

She blinks a few times and her expression of naked surprise, halfway between skepticism and hope, squeezes his chest in a painful grip. She touches his mouth and against her fingertips, letting go of a hysterical laugh, he asks, "Did you think that I wouldn't come?"
The way she widens her eyes, as if he has physically struck her, as if she wants to withdraw and then that guilty.

Jon tightens the jaw and every previous happiness seems to burst into a soap bubble. He looks away. "We'll talk later."

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They have to carry her in their arms because she is too weak and unsteady to support herself on her legs. They don't even walk halfway down the corridor that Sansa slumps against the wall. She is as pale as death, she seems unable to breathe.

In an unspoken agreement, Tormund takes her on the shoulders. Sansa passes her arms around his neck and Tormund holds her legs around his hips. If possible, against the fur and the size of the man, she appears even more minute. At the end of the corridor, Tormund makes a sign to stop.

Sansa is whispering something to him. Her eyes are glassy and she points insistently towards the wall.

Tormund's expression darkens considerably and eventually he begins to swear.

When he repeats what he has been told, the little color left on Jaime Lannister face completely disappears. He emits an indescribable sound, halfway between a moan and a cry, like a mortally wounded animal, as if someone had just stuck a blade between his shoulder blades.

They start breaking the bricks. The wall is fresh and this seems to confirm Sansa's story.

They hit with Gendry's hammer, the swords, with the sheaths and at the first gash that allows the glimpse of the door below, Jaime begins to use his left hand until his fingertips bleed.

Once the passage is cleared, they break the door. Jon lets Jaime go alone this time and when he comes out he has an arm around Brienne of Tarth.

All things considered, she seems to be fine. She has no visible wounds and she remains upright without particular difficulty. But she is obviously upset and the hand resting on Jaime's shoulder is shaken by an unmistakable tremor.

They retrace the corridor backwards and then the tunnels through the stone, together with rats and the stench of the sewers.

Arriving at a crossroads, Jaime stops and they together with him.

"We part here." He speaks and only looks at him, pretending not to notice how Brienne's eyes are fixed on him. She is a few steps away from him and stares at him confused, as if she has difficulty understanding what he is saying. "Continue along this corridor. At the end you will find three doors. Open the second. From there there is a downward spiral staircase that will take you straight up a cliff. Remember. Second door."

"Second door," Jon repeats and Jaime nods as if he has taken a burden from his shoulders.

He looks at them one by one, resolutely avoiding to look at the woman by his side. When he moves however, as expected, Brienne grabs him by the arm. "Where are you going?"
Jaime sighs, but still refuses to look at her. "I have something to do. I'll join you later."

For a long moment she remains silent, then her hand leaves his arm and gives him a push. "Liar."

"Brienne," he says and in her name he manages to contain exasperation and condescension and anger and a hint of amused fondness, "this is not the time for -"

"You never wanted to leave," she interrupts him.

Jaime closes his mouth and lowers his head. Finally he meets her gaze with a curiously, inexplicably expression of bashfulness. "No," he admits, ashamed.

Brienne hits him again, again and again. "You're an idiot. You knew how I feel."

He lets her do it for a while, but finally grabs her wrist. She stops instantly. "I had to. You would have followed me otherwise."

They stare at each other and whatever they intend to communicate through that look, it probably has a different meaning because it triggers two different reactions. He blinks and tightens his mouth. She shakes her head and takes a step back. "I'm coming with you."

"Absolutely not!"

"I won't let you do it alone," she says and folds her arms across her chest, challenging him to change her mind.

Jaime rolls his eyes. "That's exactly why I decided not to tell you."

However, when they separate, Ser Brienne of Tarth disappears with him around the corner.

Jon, who during the conversation remained silent googling at them, wondering when and how, just like in the case of Arya and Gendry, was too uncomfortable to notice that meanwhile Sansa stared at him all the time.

* 

The way down towards the Blackwater is a terrifying experience. A descent made by grasping narrow handles carved in the outer wall of the keep, with the wind whirling in the ears and a cliff below the feet, with the swirling mass of the waters of the river below ready to welcome them in its black abyss in case of fall.

The boat that Davos managed to get hold of awaits them where agreed.

They get on board and without needing to say anything, Tormund hands him Sansa. She is sleeping soundly, but even in her sleep she trembles and winces as if she were cold. Yet it cannot be cold. On the contrary, she burns like a burning ember. Jon wraps her in his cloak and Gendry's and holds her in his arms, her head tucked into the curve of his throat.

He notices the way Davos eyes are shadowed by the sight of the cuts and bruises on Sansa's face. He asks nothing and when he turns to Gendry, he shakes his head. No words needed. The disgust on Gendry's face is enough.
Jon exchanges a dark look with Tormund and his grip around Sansa intensifies.

The boat slides silently over the water, black as the deep darkness surrounding them.

The night is dark and full of terrors, he thinks.

* 

Sansa fever breaks the next morning. The Maester who has to treat her injuries demands that Jon leave the tent while he visits her. Jon shakes his head and doesn't relinquish. "I'm her family," he says simply. "I'll stay."

He doesn't say, *you healed my wounds more than once, but I don't trust you, not enough to leave you alone with her anyway.*

He doesn't say, *I almost lost her.*

He doesn't say, *I will never leave her again.* He doesn't say, *I want to be the first person she'll see when she wakes up.*

He doesn't say any of this. Still he stays.

When the Maester strips her, Jon discovers for the first time the enormity of what Sansa has suffered. Back, shoulders, arms and legs. Her skin is a constellation of scars, some thin and silvery, others thick and red despite being clearly old.

He realizes he is shaking. When the Maester turns her, the wounds only seem to get worse. Under the breast and along the abdomen. Jon turns and starts pacing back and forth across the tent.

The Maester works with rapid efficiency yet showing unsuspected delicacy. Once he has finished placing the medicine on the deepest cuts, he bandages them and cover her with the furs.

"Now all we have to do is wait," he says, standing up. He hands him a small ampoule filled with a whitish liquid. "For the pain," he explains. "Two drops in the morning and two in the evening, until the wounds are completely healed. I recommend absolute rest after the fever has broken."

Jon nods, squeezing the ampoule so hard that he feels the chasing of the glass cutting into his palm.

He goes to sit next to the cot. There is no wonder when the opening is pushed aside and Ghost appears. The direwolf looks at him, his eyes red and accusing and then goes to lie down at Sansa's feet.

* 

He doesn't know how much time has passed. Hours, maybe days. The tent moves again. This time it is Tormund's head that appears. "Jon," he says, his voice deep.

Reluctantly he lets go of Sansa's hand, not before he has tenderly kissed her knuckles.

Once outside, he realizes that it's still late at night so haven't elapsed more than a couple of hours.

"I hope it's important," he comments.

Tormund, sitting by the entrance, doesn't divert his eyes from the piece of wood he is carving. "Don't
look at me, boy."

Jon doesn't understand until he turns around and notices Tyrion. He looks awful and smells of wine even at that distance. He nods uncertainly toward the tent. "She is-"


Tyrion closes his eyes.

_He was kind to me._ Sansa's voice.

Before he can add anything else, Tyrion says, "I heard someone was left behind."

Jon replies curtly, "Before dawn we could have won the war without bloodshed."

"The queen will be happy to hear it," Tyrion says mechanically. He throws a last intense look towards the tent and then leaves. After a moment, Jon returns inside.

*

Despite everything, when Sansa wakes up he is not with her. He is in a meeting with the commanders. His stormy mood improves slightly when Lord Royce and five other Lords approach him asking about Sansa and confirmation of her rescue. Jon sees the relief of those present when the news spreads, but is momentary. The general mood is volatile and soon across the camp begin whispers and accusations. Lord Royce is one of the few to deal it directly with him. "I had pointed out the need not to leave Winterfell unguarded. My proposal for a group of men had been refused."

Refused by whom?

Lord Royce continues with regret, his eyebrows furrowed, "Lady Sansa believed that every man should be destined for war because that was your wish."

*

Cersei Lannister is dead. The city gates are opened, the banners with the three-headed dragon hanging from the plumes above the walls of the Red Keep. The war is won without the shedding of innocent blood and every promise of fire and blood is lost in the exhilarating euphoria of the soldiers. But the North remembers. Coming out of the commanders' tent and hurrying back to his own, Jon sees Daenerys arriving from the opposite direction.

*

"Did she hurt you?"

Sansa has no time to reflect on the queen's proposal.

Jon enters, visibly out of breath and with a whole series of questions. She manages to grasp only the last part.

"She didn't do anything to me," she replies, thinking of Cersei. "She has no power over me."

By the strange way he is looking at her, that it isn't the kind of answer he had expected or wanted.
One lifetime ago I knew how to sing every kind of song and guess what would be most appreciated by each person. One of love or adventure, tragic or enjoyable. With Jon every attempt to understand what he thinks seems to fail.

"What happened?" He asks, but he must immediately realize how foolish the question is because he runs a hand over his face, embarrassed. When she catches his eye, she finds a new resolution there. "Aren't you going to say it? You were right. I was wrong."

His smile is unbearably soft and -

"I told Tyrion," she says.

- and sees the moment when it dies, buried by hurt and betrayal.

"You swore." He stares at her as if she is a stranger, as if he doesn't recognize her and this, this hurts more than any wound ever inflicted to her. Because it's a wound from which she cannot heal and is so much deeper, it reaches bones and heart and the precious thing for which the Seven Gods quarrel after death.

"I know. I know what I did. I know what I am. I know why I did it. Can you say the same?"

For a moment it seems that Jon wants to argue. The rage in his black eyes, his stiff posture and the frown on his forehead, the curve of his sulky, clenched mouth. Then Jon's eyes linger on her face and the fight vanishes. He comes to sit beside her with a tired step, almost dragging his feet.

Without saying anything, he take her hands and when he rests them on his face, kissing her palm, Sansa holds her breath.

"Why?" He asks.

She licks her lips. They are chapped. Her head feels impossibly light. "Why did you send Ghost away?" She whispers.

"Why do you care?"

She tries to get her hands off his grip, but Jon won't let her. He continues to hold them between his and from time to time he bring them to his lips. Sansa would like to tell him not to do it. She would like to tell him to never stop. She thinks of those same lips elsewhere, kissing - she inhales deeply. Jon's gaze seems to reflect every thought she had, only amplified, improved.

"Didn't you think we might like to know?" With the thumb she rubs Jon's knuckles, she traces the scars that cover part of his right hand. "We lost them. The direwolves are part of us and you gave that part away as if you were giving up what it represents."

"You can't give up something you never had."

Half Stark. He always has been that. Whether it's from mother or father, does it really matter?

"Do you want to know why I told Tyrion?"

Jon doesn't answer. He doen't need to. For once, what he wants is clear to her ad if she was reading him like a book. "Because I know you could be a better king than her."
"You can't say it. It's treason."

"That makes me a traitor to the crown," Sansa smiles bitterly and stares at the blanket on her legs. "I have been told that many times in the past. I've been the daughter of a traitor for years. Whether it was true or not, it didn't matter. There are worse things than being called by derogatory names or accused of unseemly things. I will not serve a tyrant only because it's the easiest thing to do. I haven't lost my family for this. I will not lose you."

Jon rests his forehead against their intertwined hands. She feels something wet pressed against her fingers. In the end, in a broken whisper, which fully expresses a piercing conflict, she hears, "I don't want to be king."

It seems impossible to breathe around the lump in her throat. Somehow she succeeds. Somehow she manages to untangle a hand from Jon's grip. Jon's neck appears so unguarded. She runs her fingers over his tense shoulders, then backs up. She stroke his hair and her whole being gives way to the sweetness of this touch. She thinks, when was the last time you let someone comfort you like this? When did you know this kind of love, you who as a child were hungry for caresses that no one has ever given you? You who have never had a mother? It seems so unfair that someone like Jon, so worthy of love, has received so little of it in his life. Yet every love, small or large, short or lasting, has its own relevance.

"Nobody claims that you become one," she finally answers and can taste her own tears on her lips. "You will be king, but not the king. What I want is for you to destroy that damned throne. I want peace for our people. I want you to have a choice."


Whatever choice he makes, it will be his. Sansa will make sure of it.

Thousands of years later, when Jon raises his head, Sansa brings her face close to his. The tears dried on her bruised cheeks.

A sigh separates them. She sees in his dilated pupils something that she has already observed other times, but that she is finally able to recognize. Desire and fear, temptation and terror.

"I wish," she says, "there will be no more fear between us." Then she presses her lips against his.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't eat. I didn't sleep. I haven't done anything else in the last eight hours because I wanted to finish this before tonight's episode. I've done it. I deserve a dinner and a shower now.

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