'til the walls did crumble

by arahir

Summary

[CONTAINS SPOILERS FOR THE FINALE]

Jon Snow and Tormund Giantsbane and their giant dog go camping with a bunch of Wildlings. What happens next will SHOCK you. (They are buddies who fall in love lmao.)

“Not worried, are you?”

“For a crow boy? Never.” Tormund looks away, off toward the mountains in the distance where the Fist of the First Men sits as a jut of stone in the ice fields, which are turning greener day by day. “Don’t let them keep you down there, Jon Snow. Don’t die in the South.”

Notes

Don’t write drunk they said and I DID NOT listen.

See the end of the work for more notes

On the way north, in the nights, when the cold is biting and they have nothing to do but sit and drink, they talk around the fire.

“You belong here,” Tormund says one night, belly full of wine and roasted meat.
Jon smiles. The words have no second meaning, no agenda. Tormund talks to hear Tormund talk and to be listened to. “Oh, do I?”

“Aye. North. Beyond the wall. North of North. You never had the right head for pretty women and great castles.” Tormund seems very sure. An expert on many topics, and this one, too, as if knowing about Jon is the same as knowing how to tend a fire or set a tent in a storm, climb a wall of ice, fuck a woman.

“I didn’t, did I?” He’s on a roll now.

“No, no. You and that wolf. You belong in the North. You belong here.” Tormund pauses then and lets that sit between them like the fire sparking into the night sky, almost as warm. You belong here. It’s a fine notion. When Jon looks up his eyes are closed, lulled to sleep by the wine and warm venison from a deer they felled in the forest that morning. Most went to the rest of the wildlings, but Tormund saved a haunch so he could “show this boy how they eat meat in the North” as if Jon had not already been accustomed to that, as if he wasn’t also born and raised in this place.

You belong here.

At least someone in all the world thinks so.

They make headway the next day. Jon hasn’t thought to ask where they’re going. It didn’t quite seem important and it doesn’t now. Life is coming back into this world—all that worry for a winter that barely lasted half a season. Or maybe, by killing Night’s King, they killed winter, too. A fanciful thought, but not a comfortable one.

“Is there spring here?” Jon asks.

Tormund cuts off mid-sentence. He’d been in the middle of some tale of mountains that walk and talk and are human not at all, great beasts of rock and snow he saw fighting once in the mountains, past the Fist of the First Men, past where the sun can reach at all. “There’s spring everywhere,” he says as if Jon is stupid.

“Yes, but what does it look like?”

“Like spring. Are you gone mad at last? Want me to find a flower to pick and tuck in your hair? Will that make it spring?”

One of the wildling women walking near them guffaws at this and elbows her companion so she can mime placing a flower behind her ear. They both burst into giggles.

“See, ladies. He’s a looker, isn’t he.”

They smile. “Oh, finer than you, my lord.”

Tormund’s face turns to a storm. “Lord… lord. Never call me that again,” he mutters.

They make camp that night by a stream that’s just beginning to flow. Maybe that’s a sign of spring. Maybe that’s the most spring it gets here.

“Is there summer here, too?” There is at Winterfell. Fields in flower, days warm enough to wear a
shirt with the sleeves cut down. The water is still too cold to swim in there, but you can dip your feet in at least and not lose a toe.

Tormund pauses where he’s poking at the fire. “What’s gotten into you, boy?”

Jon rolls his shoulder. “Just asking.”

“Yes, there’s summer. ‘S cold though. Colder at night.”

That hardly makes a difference. It’s cold in the night now and that’s why they share the tent and keep Ghost between them. Wolf warmth, Tormund called it, as if it were a thing people said and knew and sought—but that’s him. Full of pearls of wisdom for a life only he could have lived. He’s gotten used to waking up with someone else’s hair in his mouth. Usually Ghost’s. Sometimes even his own.

“Guess I won’t cut my hair then.”

“Cut your hair… Here I thought you’d die if you lost a lock of it.”

It has been getting long. Nearly past his shoulders now, kept tied in a tail or once, at the behest of Tormund and some eager children, in twin braids at his back.

“You’re one to talk.”

“Yes, but I have fire for hair. You—” he motions to Jon’s hair, traces the length of it with his eyes. It’s loose now, falling in curls in mismatched lengths over the black furs on his shoulders. “You have shadows.”

The words lilt odd and catch in the air, pull Jon’s gaze. Tormund is looking at him in earnest. The fire does catch in his hair and in his eyes, bluer than blue. He can’t reply.

The tent that night seems too small, for the first time. It is, of course it is, but it hasn’t been a problem when body heat is more sought after than the meat they eat, than the fancy southern wine Tormund’s taken a liking to and hoards for himself. Jon holds himself tense in the dark and wonders why he is and wonders at the fact that it feels for the first time like he’s sleeping with someone instead of incidentally beside them and that the someone is Tormund, of all people. A wildling man. Maybe it is something about the red hair, he thinks nonsensically and with a panic. Maybe all the jibes were at least half right and what if he is like Ygritte was with red all the way down but darker? Why wonder, why care, it’s ridiculous—

“That wolf snores worse than a giant’s dam.” Tormund’s voice cuts the silence so suddenly Jon has to stifle a laugh. He’s right. Ghost snores terribly. He has gas, too, what with his steady diet of anything people in camp choose to give him.

“Still doesn’t snore as bad as you,” Jon says.

A hand reaches across ghost and slaps at him. “I do not snore. You snore like a mammoth. It’s a wonder that woman ever put up with you.”

“...Do I really?”

“You do.”

Well. He probably does at that. They fall into silence and Ghost’s tail starts to thump the furs between them. The rhythm lulls him to sleep.
When they aren’t running for their lives from terrors in the dark, from death itself, the Wildlings are a happy people. They have celebrations for each turn of the season and every other moon, every birth at least. A baby is born when the last of the snow melts and it’s occasion for dancing and food and wine, though they don’t have much. No one has much of anything now, but say what you will for the dead—they didn’t empty any larders and casks. The Wildlings find some pillage on the way up and if Jon were a better Commander of the Night’s Watch he would say something, but he’s not, so he joins them in the plunder and in the celebration.

“I was thinking, before summer comes, I might go south. See how Sansa is faring.”

The feast is in full swing. Jon prefers this to Winterfell’s feast days, with the cloying awkwardness of Catelyn’s studied disregard and the weight of tradition on everyone’s shoulders. Here, the only tradition is to eat and drink as much as possible. Even Jon is a quick study at that.

Tormund has a rabbit in one hand and a wineskin in the other. He sets both down at Jon’s words. “Will you, then.”

“Just for a month.”

“Ah…”

“Not worried, are you?”

“For a crow boy? Never.” He looks away, off toward the mountains in the distance where the Fist of the First Men sits as a jut of stone in the ice fields. They won’t go so far North; most are happy where they’ve landed, close enough to the forest to still find game, close enough to the wall to run if the Long Night isn’t so gone as they’d hoped. “Don’t let them keep you down there, Jon Snow. Don’t die in the South. Remember what you are.”

“I know what I am. I’m a bastard. A bastard in the North.”

Jon laughs, but Tormund sits up. “No. No, you’re not. You were a king and you belong here, north of North.” His words are odd; almost a song, but a wildling one, without anything but rhythm, like one of the songs sung to keep the night at bay and to keep bellies full, to keep fires warm. “You belong here with us, Jon Snow. Don’t let them keep you.”

“I won’t.” Jon says it as a scoff, but Tormund’s eyes darken and he knows he’s said the wrong words, the wrong way. “No. No, I won’t.” This time it’s a promise.

Tormund says nothing for a moment and then softly, “They don’t let Kings live in that land.” He says it to himself and then stands and walks off among the fires and tents.

When Jon goes to rest, he’s not in their tent. Jon watches the fire glow against the hide walls and listens to the soft sound of Ghost breathing beside him.

He wakes once to the feeling of eyes on him, but in the morning, he can’t recall if it was a dream.
When the time comes, Tormund sends him with as much food as the horse can carry. He tries to send Ghost, too, but he had a point about kings and their short lives south of the Wall—and the point stands for dire wolves as well. For all that Jon was a king and will never be again, the memory for such things is long and fatal. Best to be nothing but Commander of the Night’s Watch, old and unambitious, which he is at least in part. Or: his greatest ambition is to live the rest of his life without hearing the name Aegon Targaryen again. If he does, it will undoubtedly be one of the last things he hears before an untimely death.

In a way, it’s a wonder he lived so long. Eddard Stark was a wise man.

“He should stay,” Jon says. “Someone has to look after you.”

Tormund shakes his head. “You’re right. Wolves don’t belong in the South. You come back to us.”

“I will.” Jon knows better than to laugh this time.

Tormund clasps his shoulder and then slides his hand to the back of Jon’s neck, no more intimate than any other touch between them. “I mean it. You come back to us,” he whispers, and then tips Jon’s head to his and taps their foreheads together. Jon closes his eyes at the shock of it, but it isn’t so strange. The breath on his face as warm and smell like nothing but the cool air around them.

The journey south is fast. He makes it in half a moon, traveling light. Castle Black is manned with a skeleton force, but there’s nothing left to guard against but Wildlings who would rather be anywhere else than south now. They send him through with a quick word and a blessing; few faces he knew still remain.

The Long Night was short, but it took much. Somehow, the only place the loss doesn’t bite is north of the wall. Now that summer’s come, not much of it looks familiar, and the parts that do are painted over in greens and yellows and reds of the tundra plants that cling to life and stone.

All of Winterfell feels like a crypt now.

Every hall has its own memory. Every stone, it feels, has some lost friend to whisper about.

If Sansa feels the same, she doesn’t show it. She’s taken to rule the way Jon knew she would. Jon was happy for her, and wary, and in a bone-deep way, scared. She could be a queen more a terror that Cersei ever was, but she’s wiser, too, and better and stronger. Sansa is better at the game now—better by miles than any of them were. She rules just and hard, good in all the ways Jon couldn’t be, harsh in all the ways Jon needed to be but couldn’t.

In the end, he was. But no one wants to celebrate a Queenslayer. He might prefer death to that name, anyway.

He arrives just in time for dinner; after greetings are over, they sit in Sansa’s rooms and talk of everything that isn’t the war past. There’s news of Bran—apparently the six kingdoms have benefited from the rule of someone utterly unflinching and viceless. Tyrion’s pet project of an improved sewer system is going through and Sam and Gilly have their second—his first—child now. Nothing of Arya. Not a whisper or a raven, but then, it’s expected. If they hear from her in the next ten years, Jon will be surprised.

“And what is it you’ve been up to? North-of-the-wall,” she says, sing-song.

Jon shrugs. “Tormund and I have been settling the Wildlings back north. It’s beautiful there this time
of year, not that you’d know it.”

“You and… Tormund. Really.”

“Yes.”

“An odd pair.”

“Not quite.” He wonders if that’s how they seem to others; him smaller and darker, the once-heir to a broken empire, a three times over and never again king, not for all the gold in Westeros, not for all the glory in the North, not for all the duty in the land, and Tormund Giantsbane, kissed by fire, half a myth, and the most jovial soul in the North. “Well, maybe.”

She smiles.

“Actually, I was going to ask if I could buy a few casks of wine off you. He loves it—says our wine is sweeter in the south.”

Sansa opens her mouth and closes it. “Yes. Yes, of course. Jon, did you just call this the South?”

“No, no. I mean, that’s what he calls it.”

“...That’s what he calls it.” Now she’s grinning.

Jon feels vaguely annoyed, though he can’t square why. “What is it?”

“I’ve never thought about friends. Not during the war. Not now. But you’ve always had a knack for making them. I’m glad.”

“He’s a good man,” Jon says awkwardly and hates that it is awkward to say so.

Sansa hums. “I’ll send you with extra horses to carry your wine. For your… friend.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, of course.”


He stays an extra week out of the sure knowledge that the day he leaves, some fatal new news will break, but he’s wrong. The kingdoms are quiet, now. People have had enough of war for a season at least. When he’s says his farewells it’s to little fanfare.

Sansa’s words give him something to think about on the way back, and it turns out he needs it. Needs the amusement of wondering what it means to have friends in this world and if that’s indeed what they are. Sam was a friend. Tormund is something different. A brother, perhaps, but not like Rob was, not like Bran is.

A storm takes him by surprise, out of season. Winter isn’t done with them yet, it seems. The snow isn’t much; just a little flury, but it’s enough to bog the horses down for days, until he decides its best to camp it out and wait for spring to come in earnest and burn it away. That takes an extra week, and by then he’s losing count of days. Time stacks up and his promise to be home in a moon which at first seemed so simple is foolish now, and dangerously so. The road is collapsed in one place,
blocked by tree and rock and ice in another. It takes a week to go back the way he came, another three to pick his way around it.

It was so easy to travel during the war, by ship, by dragon, by horse—time seemed to fly past at a ridiculous pace, and now he feels each mile and day like a weight dragging him down. By the time he’s in sight of their camp it’s been twice as long as he promised, at least. Days more than that, even.

He can see the smoke before he sees anyone. Miles ahead, rising above the trees and then above the plains of rock and green. Tormund is right. The breeze here is fresher. More free.

They don’t keep guards stationed, but he wonders if the way he looks they’ll even let him in camp. He might have to make them call Tormund and confirm he’s not some last wight wondered in from the wild.

In the end, he needn’t have worried.

At the edge of camp, he spots a familiar figure seated on a knoll of rock. It looks up as he approaches. It’s impossible so far away, but he swears he can see the blue of Tormund’s eyes, like two windows into the sky behind him. Not blue like the walkers’ were blue, not that unearthly chip-of-ice shine. Tormund would hate to hear it, but his eyes are warm, like the sky or the cornflowers that grow wild at the edge of the forest. They brighten as he leaps off the rock and runs toward Jon who is already dismounted, not sure what he’s readying for until it’s on top of him.

Tormund is bigger. He’s reminded of that now as the man lifts him into the air and buries his face in Jon’s hair, which is filthy. More: he can feel lips press to his temple, feels a smile crack his face for the first time since he started his journey back. A friend, Sansa’s voice chimes in his head, clear as a bell. If this what it is, then he’ll take it a thousand times over. It feels like desperately more than that in that moment. Jon grips him back, both arms around his thick neck and the furs that shawl his shoulders.

“You fucking fool. Gods, you fool, I knew you weren’t dead. I knew because I had to kill you for being such a fool.” Tormund’s words are muffled.

“There was a storm. And rocks.” It’s hard to speak, hard to make sense, not because of the arms crushing the air out of his lungs but because of the weight lodged in his throat.

Tormund shakes him. “You stupid boy.”

“I’m hardly a boy, you know,” Jon laughs.

“A stupid man, then.” Tormund loosens his grip enough to pull back and look at Jon properly. “You look like you were dragged from here to that Red City of yours.”

“The Red Keep? No, just to Last Hearth.”

Tormund pulls him in again for another hug before releasing him, though he keeps a hand on his back. He sees the extra horses and their burden. “And what’s this?”

“You didn’t think I’d go all the way South and not bring you something?”

Tormund blinks and then laughs in his full-body way, ruffling Jon’s already ruined hair. “A stupid man, and a good one.”
“He’s been so glum without you,” one of the Wildling women says when Jon is back in camp and been shown to enough water to at least wet the dirt off of him and enough food to take the edge off his hunger. “He was like a bride mourning her husband.” She shakes her head.

“Oh, shut up. I was sad because I knew I’d have to go scrape his carcass out of the ice come summer.”

“Would you have? Thank you, Tormund.” Jon puts on his best smile, knowing it looks fake and trying to push it into the ridiculous. Tormund is fine now he’s dipped into one of the casks of sweet wine. There’s even a bit of red over his cheeks to match his hair.

At his grin, Tormund looks like he might gag. “Don’t look at me with those big eyes. ‘S disgusting.” He goes back to whittling the bit of wood in his hand as if Jon is the most disinteresting thing north of the Wall.

“No one’s ever accused me of having big eyes.”

“Well, they’re the only big thing on you. And it’s all the women talk about—when they talk about you at all, of course.”

“Jealous? Wish they’d talk about your blue eyes? Blue, like a summer sky,” Jon mocks in a lighter tone and Tormund rolls his eyes. “How was it, really?”

Tormund takes a moment to answer, turning the wood over and over, bringing it to his face.

“We got on fine. Won’t pretend I didn’t miss that princely face though. Big eyes and all.”

“Eyes and all,” Jon repeats and snorts.

“No, truly boy. You were missed.” He whittles more at the wood in his hand. It’s something he must have started days ago. Weirwood, now that Jon is looking, and almost to a form he can recognize. Four legs, a snout. One ear. “I prayed to the gods you would return safe. And when that didn’t work, I prayed to your Seven, too.”

“They’re not my Seven.”

“No. But I thought: it couldn’t hurt.”

His words have a weight to them, to match the one Jon felt drag at him after ever lost day and mile. “I came back as fast as I could. I didn’t want to be gone so long.”

It’s quiet but the sound of knife on wood. Jon feels his eyes growing heavy. It feels as if the sky is watching him. It feels as if he’s safe, at last. It feels as if he hadn’t realized he wasn’t before then, or that he wanted to be so much. Safety has never been a feature of life in Westeros. He never sought it, never wanted it. But this… having a friend to worry after him and to watch his back, to hold the camp while he was gone, to wait for him and welcome him home. It’s good. It’s better than good. It may be the best thing this life has given him and let him keep for more than a season.

He must fall asleep, because when he wakes, he’s in the tent under a pile of furs with a wall of soft white before him. Ghost is snoring softly. There’s an arm over his waist.

You belong here, he thinks.
For the first time, he believes it.

End Notes

in the next part ghost gets sexiled from his own tent will the oppression EVER stop? unbelievable. we want dire wolf rights and we want them now!!!

there is definitely more to go with this and nsfw stuff but as i'm about to leave to journey to the mountains-without-internet in 3 days i didn't want to make any promises. i will update it one day but that day may be in september so i'm sorry and i love you <33

[fic on twitter if you want to spread my shame]

You can watch me meme game of thrones at 3am on twitter and tumblr! Thank you so much for reading!!!

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