The Triumph of Winter

by foreverreadingbeautifulbooks

Summary

Jon’s heart constricted at the thought of his Sansa standing proud and defiant as dragonflames consumed her. “How could you do that?” he yelled. “How could you think that your death was an acceptable outcome?”

“You hypocrite!” she responded, throwing the accusation in his face as she stepped in closer, chest heaving in time with his own. “As if you hadn’t used your own life as a bargaining chip to save the North - to save our family. I can play the same game, Jon. I’ve watched too many members of my family die for me to surrender you to the flames, not when I might be able to save your life with mine! Not- ”

“Sansa!” Jon cut her off, aghast at her words as he stepped in and gripped her arms. “Your
life is far more important than mine could ever be.”

She met his eyes defiantly, a fury contained in them that ignited his bones. “Not to me.”

- or -

The political landscape has changed in the aftermath of Daenerys Targaryen's decimation of King's Landing. As the wolves and the dragons prepare for another battle, the realm can only hold its breath and wonder who will win the Game of Thrones after this.

*(Canon Divergent Fic after 8x05)*

Notes

For anyone who was as frustrated with the episode 8x06 as I was, I've attempted to rewrite the ending and give Game of Thrones a more meaningful conclusion. Although part of me wants to entirely rewrite Season 8, my outline and drafts are both already so extensive that I've decided to limit myself by making this fic 100% canon compliant through 8x05. I hope you all enjoy this ending to my favorite show.

Also fair warning, I've marked this fic as mature because there will be some memories of rape/torture/death and there will also be some rather brutal descriptions of events that happen throughout this fic, but I'm not sure yet if I can or will write any smut.
There were certain things in life that Sansa could count on: the sun would rise in the east, winter would come, and Jon would say goodbye before he left. They’d been separated several times since they’d first reunited at Castle Black two years ago and each time Jon had made a point to say farewell, his waves to her as he rode away like promises that he would come home to her soon. She wasn’t certain if he understood on some level how deeply the years spent separated from her family had affected her or if this tradition had been born from his need to remind himself that someone cared that he was gone, but she’d come to cherish these moments between the two of them. It hurt every time he left, just as it hurt that he was always leaving, but in those moments Jon was solely hers and a piece of her knew that he’d fight the whole world to get back to Winterfell and to her.

Today though, he’d just vanished. There had been no goodbye. The only things he’d given her today were a frustrating desire to slap him when he completely shut down her logical argument to the Dragon Queen that the soldiers needed rest and the startling news of his parentage. She was still reeling from the thought that Jon is not her brother, but her cousin and a Targaryen. Earlier it had seemed as though he was disparaging his bastard status once again and both she and Arya had immediately argued that he wasn’t any less of a Stark then they were. Sansa had assumed at the time that he’d been feeling as if he’d betrayed their father’s memory by bending the knee, so she’d been glad her sister was there to help her drag Jon out of his melancholy. Both of them had quickly learned that that wasn’t the case. Once Bran finished explaining, Arya had walked over to Jon and hugged him fiercely before looking into his eyes and repeating, “You’re my brother. You’ve always have my brother and nothing will ever change that, including this.” Sansa had nodded and wrapped her arms around around him as well. “You’re still Jon,” she had whispered. His arms had tightened around her until she could scarcely breathe before he turned and walked back toward the castle to prepare for his journey.

Her thoughts had been spinning too quickly to force anything else out of her mouth. All she could think about was the danger this placed him in and what a better ruler he’d be than the power-mad woman he seemed determined to support. She wondered how he felt about learning that the father he’d grown up modeling himself after wasn’t truly his. She wondered how he felt about the fact that his identity as a bastard had been a lie. She tried not to wonder at the weight inside her chest that had disappeared faster than winter snows melted under spring sunshine.

But they hadn’t had time to discuss any of that. By the time Sansa got her thoughts in order, Jon was surrounded by people preparing to leave. She’d known it wasn’t the right time to say the words she knew he needed to hear. And so she’d watched from the ramparts as he rode out of Winterfell without saying goodbye and without turning back.

When she’d discovered an hour later that Arya had left as well, Sansa had felt her world beginning to crumble. There hadn’t been a word of warning, only a note addressed to Sansa that Arya had left on her pillow.

Sansa, Cersei has done enough harm to our family and the realm. I’m going to cross her name off my list before she can kill anyone else.
Sansa thanked the servant who had brought her the note, careful not to show any emotions on her face as she threw it in the fire after reading it. If word got out that one of the ladies of House Stark was traveling down the Kingsroad alone, it could put her sister in grave danger. No matter how skilled Arya was, she was still human and there were plenty of men who’d be willing to hunt her down for the right price. Sansa remembered all too well her time in King’s Landing under Cersei’s thumb and her stomach clenched in knots at the image of her sister in that position. Laying her account books on the table, she headed for the godswood to ground her spirits by seeking out the only member of her family that hadn’t deserted her today.

Sansa had immediately panicked when she’d stepped into the grove by Winterfell’s weirwood tree and Bran had not been there. Over the past several months, it seemed he was always seated in front of the weirwood unless she sent someone to bring him back to inside for food, meetings, or sleep. Today though, she couldn’t find Bran and her frantic calls to him were met only with silence. Suddenly, it was five years ago and she was in a different godswood, surrounded by snakes instead of snow. Joffrey was laughing at her tears as he gleefully recounted all the gruesome details of the murders of her mother and brother. Clinging to the branches of the weirwood for support, Sansa tried to force her lungs to breathe. *They’re all gone,* her mind screamed at her, *my family is gone and I’ll never see them again.*

“My lady?” Brienne called as she came through the trees. She’d stayed outside the grove to allow the Stark siblings their privacy but whether she’d heard Sansa’s panic attack or only Sansa calling for her brother, she must have heard enough to cause some concern.

It was enough to snap Sansa back to the present. She forced air back into her lungs while she forced her rational mind to take over. No one would have taken Bran on the march south, so he had to be somewhere in Winterfell. Composing herself, she turned and asked Ser Brienne to accompany her back into the keep to look for Bran. Although Brienne’s blue eyes still looked concerned, she seemed to sense that today was one of the few days when Sansa would not want to share any of her burdens with her sworn sword.

It took them an hour to track him down. No one they questioned had seen him that day, until finally they stumbled across Maester Wolkan who knew exactly where her brother had disappeared to and sent her to the last place she’d expected to find Bran - her solar. Ser Brienne seemed as relieved to see him as Sansa was and happily acquiesced to Sansa’s request that she guard the room. *This was one conversation,* Sansa reflected as she closed the door behind her and turned to face her brother, *that should definitely not be overheard by anyone.* Biting back a question as to what he was doing here - throughout the past several months she’d learned that Bran would often ignore inquiries that he didn’t deem important - she settled into the chair next to him and cut right to the question that she truly wanted to ask.

“What’s going to happen?”

When she’d asked this of Bran she didn’t know what she expected. It certainly was not the emotion that she encountered on his face as he glanced up at her before quickly looking away. Since he’d returned, his face and voice had been as blank as if he’d never had any feelings at all. To see Bran as anything other than expressionless was so startling she almost missed his next few words.

“I don’t know,” he whispered sadly back, “I wish that I did…”

He paused for so long as he stared into the fire that she started to wonder if he wanted to be alone before he continued, “I told you once before that I could see everything that’s ever happened to everyone and everything that’s happening right now, but I can’t see the future. I’ve only ever seen a few disjointed fragments and prophesies, and then only by accident. I can only intentionally look into
the present and the ages of the past.”

She was about to ask more when she heard him say, almost to himself, “I’m useless and broken.”

“You are not,” Sansa protested fiercely, feeling far out of her depth at this sudden turn in the conversation but refusing to back down. She had been so careful with her brother ever since the first day she saw him again when he made comments about her wedding night. Pushing away echoes of his words - I’m sorry for all that’s happened to you; I’m sorry it had to happen in our home. - Sansa wrapped her arms around herself before a shudder could run down her spine. She tried to put all the steel of her mother into her voice as she told him, “You did everything you could.”

“And what did any of it accomplish?” He finally had a look other than weary sadness in his eyes and his next words contain such fierceness that it is as if the wolves of winter have come again through him. “I spent months trying to find a way to get the Night King’s mark off of me, even as it seemed to freeze all my emotions and bury them under an avalanche of snow. I spent months trying to learn to see better so I could understand the his secrets, but I failed to find anything that would end him. I spent years warging into animals and hoped that if I learned to slip out of my body easily enough, I might be able to slip into Night King’s or Viserion’s mind to stop him when he arrived. He was too powerful though and had too tight a grip over his dragon for me to break through. In the end all I could do was use my warging to control the steeds of his White Walkers so they couldn’t ride into the battle and to send other creatures against them, until eventually they got so tired of avoiding my tactics that they came for me.”

“What?” Sansa breathed out. She wasn’t sure if he didn’t hear her or if he just couldn’t stop himself now that he’d started his confession.

“I tried and I failed and now Winterfell is surrounded with the ashes of those I could not save. In the end, the only thing reason we’re still alive is because Arya’s training proved more useful than mine ever did.”

“Bran!” She finally managed to cut him off and saw the pain in his eyes as he met her gaze. Why hadn’t she noticed it in the past few days? Between nursing the wounded, making sure everyone was clothed and fed, and trying her hardest not go to out of her mind with worry over Jon heading south with a queen who - despite being of the house of fire and blood - appeared to have no warmth in her heart, somehow she’d failed to notice how vulnerable her little brother was. After almost a year since their reunion, she felt as though she was seeing the real Bran for the first time since she’d first left Winterfell to head to King’s Landing so many years ago. “You saved us. You just admitted it yourself. I may not have fought with all of you, but I’ve heard enough about the battle and enough stories from Jon about the White Walkers to know that if they had managed to attack us along with the dead, no one would have survived.”

He looked so badly as if he wanted to believe her that it made his face appear young and vulnerable. “Maybe so,” he responded softly, looking down at his hands.

“Definitely so,” she said, placing her hand over his to bring his attention back to her. Her overwhelming instinct was to protect her little brother. She’d do anything to protect him from his demons, even if it means revealing her own. “You did more than anyone else could have.” If anyone is useless here, she thought to herself, it’s me. I had to content myself with hiding in the crypts while all the rest of you fought.

Suddenly it’s as though the Bran of the past few minutes was gone and the Three-Eyed Raven had returned to look straight through her - straight into her soul. “The same could be said of you,” he said to Sansa with a slight quirk of his mouth. “You spent months making sure Winterfell’s defenses were maintained, that our bannermen did not desert us, that everyone was fed and armored, and that
preparations were made to help care for the wounded after the battle. I know you wished to fight and
die alongside all the brave men and women defending the castle, but at least half of those who
remain would not be alive were it not for your contributions to this fight.”

Part of Sansa wanted to weep at those words, but she contented herself with taking a moment to
squeeze his hand in gratitude. Perhaps no one else had noticed, but she had fought this battle longer
and harder than any of them except perhaps Jon or Bran. And while no one would sing songs of her
valor in this fight the way they would about Arya, it was so comforting to receive this small amount
of recognition for what she had done to win the war against the dead.

She blinked away her tears before meeting his eyes again as she responded, “We are the wolves of
Winterfell. The four of us are the pack who has survived through all the hell the world could throw at
us and found each other again. We fought against the dead and saved as many people as we could. I
know you wish you could have done more, saved more…”

As images of Theon lying on his pyre came to mind she had to stop for a second to clear her throat,
“I wish I could have as well. But, as you said, we all have skills that were necessary in this fight.
You did everything you could. I’m so proud of you, little brother.”

Bran leaned in to give her a small hug and it crumbled the last bit of her control. Her brother had not
initiated unnecessary contact with anyone since he’d been back and for a moment it felt as though
they’d never been separated. She gave him a fierce hug in response.

“Thank you, Sansa,” he whispered, before pulling back and looking into her eyes, “I’ve missed
talking to you.” He stared down into the fire, “But I know this isn’t why you came to see me. I saw
your face in the godswood earlier. You’re worried about Jon.”

Her mouth hardened into a thin line but she couldn’t bring herself to respond to that comment
directly so instead she nodded and merely said, “Tyrion is afraid of the Dragon Queen. I want to
know why. You might not be able to see what’s going to happen, but can you look into her past and
keep an eye on her present in the days that follow? We need whatever advantages we can get if
we’re going to ensure that Jon makes it out of all this alive.”

He nodded back at her gravely and she knew deep in her heart that he would join her in doing
whatever he could to protect Jon. While it wasn’t as reassuring as having Jon by her side had always
been, she was so glad that she didn’t need to face this alone.

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Sansa gave Sam a week to grieve before approaching him after the battle of Winterfell. Despite how
necessary their discussion was, she wished she could have given him longer. Losing a brother was a
terrible thing and Sam had lost two within such a short amount of time. Although Dickon Tarly had
died months before, Sam had only discovered his death when Daenerys had told him about it. Sansa
shuddered to remember what Gilly had confided in her about the callous way that the Dragon Queen
had informed him of his brother’s death - the accusation that Dickon had been a traitor to oppose her
rule hanging between them unspoken. Watching his fellow brother of the Night’s Watch die saving
Sam’s life had been perhaps even more traumatizing. He’d lost too much. But then again, she
thought bitterly to herself, everyone I know has lost too much to these terrible wars.

Walking out of kitchens, she strode toward the Bell Tower where the little Tarly family was residing.
Sansa had liked Sam immediately when he’d shown up in Winterfell over a month ago and understood why Jon had always spoken of him so fondly. She’d gratefully accepted his offer to help in the rookery and had made sure they were given rooms near to both it and the Maester’s Turret. One evening, when she’d come to ask Sam’s advice about food storage, he had bumbled nervously about different storage techniques debated over by maesters for a good ten minutes before Gilly had interjected, “Just be sure to put some wood or stones under the containers, so that the rats can’t get into them.” The next day Sansa had invited Gilly to a meeting of her advisors and had been rewarded by with solid and practical advice. At Sansa’s request, Gilly had assisted in organizing food and weaponry before the battle. Sam was very knowledgable, while his wife had a more practical mind, but they both had kind hearts and Sansa knew she could rely on them to give her wise counsel.

Sam greeted her with his nervous smile as he opened the door to her knock. “Come in, come in, Lady Sansa,” he said, trying to suppress a yawn. “We need to talk quietly.”

“So little Sam is finally sleeping?” she asked Gilly, settling into the chair next to her as Sam took another chair and gazed sleepily into the fire. Ever since the Battle of Winterfell, the little boy had been filled with a profound terror of the dead and refused to sleep at night, keeping a silent vigil till either morning came or he accidentally drifted off to sleep. The nights he did manage to sleep were filled with nightmares, and Sam and Gilly would inevitably be woken by his screams. Both of them looked exhausted and Sansa wondered if they’d even had time to deal with their own nightmares or if all their time had been devoted to their son.

“I know you both have many cares right now,” she told them, staring at the floor. “But I need to ask for your help.”

Gilly reached over and laid a hand on Sansa’s knee, forcing her to look up into her friend’s kind eyes. “You don’t need to ask,” Gilly said.

Sansa smiled thankfully, “What I came to discuss with you is dangerous-”

Sam looked up sharply, “If this is about overthrowing the Dragon Queen,” he told her with grim determination as all traces of his former tiredness disappeared, “I’ll do whatever I can.”

Gilly grasped her husband’s hand, but her eyes never left Sansa’s as she calmly responded, “So will I.”

And that was that. For the first time since she’d escaped from the clutches of her captors, Sansa began to plot treason. It was the dragons, she told her friends as they sat together and tried to determine how to bring Daenerys Targaryen’s reign to an end. They could overthrow her armies, but the dragons gave the queen too much power. There was no way to face them without being destroyed. Sam didn’t know if there was any way dragons could be killed without White Walkers or other dragons, but he declared that the answer to every question could be found in a book and it was decided that he and Gilly - for no one else would be trusted with this treasonous plot other than Bran - would look through all the books they had brought from Oldtown as well as any books from Winterfell’s extensive library that might provide answers.
Sansa smiled contentedly as she headed to her solar at the end of the day. Bran had been spending many of his evenings in front of the fire there - resting and writing books of history or reading books of medicine. Although several hours of every morning were still spent in front of the weirwood, fulfilling his duties at the Three-Eyed Raven by researching history and spying on the self-proclaimed Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, his days were no longer silent but had been filled with activity. Her initial suggestion that he train with the maester had been met with some skepticism on his part and some apprehension on Maester Wolkan’s, but to Sansa’s satisfaction both had changed their minds within the first day. Maester Wolken had informed her that very afternoon what a welcome presence her brother had been as his assistant in the sickrooms around Winterfell. And Bran had clearly fallen in love with his studies and threw his whole heart into learning how to heal others. He claimed that while he could learn many things by looking into the past, medicine was something you had to grow skilled at with practice.

A few days after that, she’d spotted him in the yard on the back of a horse. His excited smile as he rode up to her chattering about how he’d had the saddle remade using the design Tyrion had once given him and how well Snowfall was learning was the only thing that had kept Sansa from demanding that he wait until she sure the horse was fully trained to respond to his commands. But the smile that had melted her heart as a child was even more persuasive now that she had not seen it in so long. So Sansa kept her protests to herself, although that did not stop her from bidding each and every guard and stablehand to vow that they would keep wary eyes out for her brother. Despite her fears for his safety, there was something particularly beautiful, particularly Bran, about the way he was approaching life with all his old enthusiasm and love for those around him. Every day he seemed more and more like his old self as the Night King’s mark slowly faded from his wrist.

Since she’d first made her request of him, their evenings have been spent in each others’ company as he informed her of anything he had learned about Daenerys Targaryen that day. She’d learned much of the Dragon Queen’s time across the sea amongst the Dothraki, freeing slaves and claiming armies in Astapor and Meereen. Although she had initially felt sympathy for the girl who had been tormented by her brother and then sold as a bride, that feeling was quickly overtaken by the loathing she’d felt hearing about the type of ruler that Daenerys had been. Some of Cersei’s atrocities had made more sense than some of these cruelties and violent acts that the queen and her dragons committed in the name of justice. Even more disturbing was the way she claimed freedom as her battlecry, despite the fact that she seemed to profit the most from destroying the wealthy and claiming both their former wealth and their former slaves as her own. Daenerys had long claimed that as a Targaryen it was her birthright to rule Westeros, but clearly the only right she had to rule in Essos was that of a conqueror.

After these reports, Sansa often found herself telling Bran about the building projects that were restoring their home, or discussions she’d had with the lords and ladies that were petitioning her to focus the resources of the North in one area or another. He responded with stories of his day or sometimes with the stories he’d never wished to share before of his adventures during his time beyond the Wall. Although Sansa knew Hodor had accompanied her brother, he’d only managed to speak to her of Hodor once; Sansa had held Bran in her arms as he cried about the way he’d ruined the man’s life, not once, but twice over. Despite her protests that Hodor’s fate had not been Bran’s fault, Sansa could tell he didn’t believe her. He spoke more often of the Reeds, looking sad when he spoke of Jojen and wistful when he spoke of Meera. Sansa wished she could have met the strange boy and known the fierce girl, but although they had spent years together, Meera had left for her
home almost immediately after seeing Bran safely to his. Even now she could tell there was something about their parting that was weighing on him, but he never brought it up and Sansa didn’t ask.

She knew firsthand that everyone had secrets they’d rather not share. When Arya had returned home, the two of them had managed to tell each other about most of their pasts - although not in great detail. Each could sense there were deep hurts that the other had not revealed, but the sisters had an unspoken agreement that no matter what they argued about in the present, they would not push each other for any information about the past that they weren’t ready to share.

Now she began to slowly dig out some of her old hurts once again as she told Bran some of her stories from the past several years. In some ways it was easier to share her feelings with him than it had been with her sister because she didn’t have to spend as much time explaining uncomfortable events he’d already seen, while in other ways it was harder because he knew the details that she would much rather forget or was shamed to remember.

Reforging a relationship with Jon had been much easier; they were both filled with the same fire to protect themselves and the ones they loved, which led to passionate fights, intense discussions, shared humor, and peaceful silences as they figured out how to accomplish those goals together. They had reunited in their most desperate hours and each had relied on the other to help bring them back from that point. They had spent their first night together pouring out their stories and souls to each other, which left little room for secrets between them afterward. At least, that’s how it had been before he’d left for Dragonstone. He’d barely had four conversations with her while he’d been home. Sansa didn’t know what it would be like between them when Jon came back. Some traitor piece of her heart that she tried to ignore reminded her that she didn’t know what it would be like between them if Jon came back.

It was not as easy for Sansa and Bran to relearn each other. Bran’s experiences had been nothing like her own. Sometimes she felt more like a mother than a sister to him, while at other times he seemed so wise beyond his years that she felt like a small child in comparison. But it was sweet to truly have her brother back and she had to admit that she had missed having a friend and confidante to share her evenings with. She’d missed that almost as much as Jon after he’d left. Although Arya’s steady presence and accurate judgments had been invaluable throughout the past several months, her sister usually found it preferable to spend the evenings quietly honing her skills with weaponry than socializing with her older sister. One of the best things about Petyr Baelish’s death months earlier was that it had allowed the sisters to openly tease each other, share smiles and meals, and put aside petty arguments. Still, Arya and Sansa had been busy preparing Winterfell for battle and there had not been much time to spend alone in each other’s company. It was a relief now to fall back into the habit of setting aside the mantle of leader and lady for a few hours every night and simply be Sansa to a member of her family.

Today, however, Sansa knew something was wrong the second she walked into the room. The set of Bran’s shoulders was completely tense and while part of her wanted to laugh because he looked just like Jon when he was brooding, the rest of her was terrified.

“Daenerys knows,” he said as he glanced up at her upon hearing the door shut.

Sansa hurried over to him as she asked frantically, “Knows what?” At this point, she had committed too many acts of treason against the Dragon Queen to be sure which one he might be referring to.

“She knows about Jon,” Bran informed her. “She knows who he is. She knows he has the greater claim to the Iron Throne than she does.”

“How did she find out?” Had Tyrion betrayed Sansa’s confidence? Had her faith in his sense of self-
preservation been misplaced?

“Jon told her the night before the battle.”

Jon told her?! Sansa’s hand curled into a fist as her mind ran through all the implications of what this meant. That idiot! She was going to kill him, if Daenerys didn’t beat her to it. Despite warning after warning that she’d tried to give him about being smarter than their family members - and even more specifically about the Dragon Queen that he’d dragged into their home - Jon had put his very life in danger by telling a woman obsessed with power that he had the potential to take from her what she’d always wanted.

Suddenly her mind registered the last words he’d said and she had to ask for clarification, “Wait…he told her the night before the battle?”

At Bran’s nod, she sat stunned, barely able to register his next few words as he told her that the battle had begun almost immediately afterwards. All she could think was that he’d informed the Dragon Queen almost three days before he’d bothered to tell his sisters. Sansa blinked away hot tears as the questions pounded their way through her mind. Why would he do that? Did he trust that woman more than them? After all Sansa had done to protect him and to protect his throne, did he really still not trust her enough to come to her first? What if he really did love the beautiful Targaryen girl? She hadn’t even realized how much she’d been hoping that some of his interactions with the Dragon Queen had been purely based in political manipulations until this very moment.

She needed to get out of this room. Claiming a headache, she walked to her bedroom and for the first time since Theon’s death, cried herself to sleep. The next day passed in a daze and it seemed as though only minutes passed before Sansa found herself in her solar again.

She almost wanted to tell Bran to forgo his reports of the Dragon Queen. But he looked so serious as he gazed into her eyes and opened his mouth to tell her of the conversation between Jon and Daenerys after the Battle of Winterfell that Sansa found herself powerless to stop him. And then Bran spoke of Jon’s rejection of Daenerys’ advances and the irate queen demanding that he never tell anyone his true identity. She almost couldn’t help the small smile that graced her lips upon hearing the queen’s words - “Sansa will want to see me gone and you on the Iron Throne.” The queen didn’t know how right she was, although not for the reasons that Sansa knew the Dragon Queen suspected. That smile faltered when Bran told her about how afterward Jon had made his way furiously to Sansa’s chambers, but had left without knocking when he’d heard the sound of her crying in her room.

Sansa heart was beating a steady rhythm of hope - perhaps Jon had not fallen as far under the influence of the Dragon Queen as she had feared. Before Sansa had a chance to think how to respond to Bran’s story, a hurried knock sounded at the door. “My lady,” Brienne’s voice called at the same time as Sansa rushed over to open the door.

“Brienne, what is the m-” Before she could even finish her sentence, Sansa was almost barreled over by a flash of white fur leaping into her arms. She managed to stay upright only by grabbing Ghost’s neck as he excitedly licked her face. In seconds, Bran was laughing and petting Ghost along with her.

“How did you get here?” she asked Ghost delightedly at the same time as Bran said dryly, “I guess he missed you.”
They spoke of wolves that night - his Summer and her Lady. He told her about the wolf dreams that began after his fall and how Rickon and later Arya told him that they experienced similar ones. “I suspect Jon has had them as well,” he informed her, “although I’ve not yet had a chance to ask him. But from the way people spoke of how Robb and Grey Wind moved in battle, I’m almost certain that Robb was a skin-changer as well. The ability to warg appears to run deeply enough through the Stark line that we all had that connection with our wolves.”

“Except for me,” Sansa murmured. Why could she never be like the rest of her siblings? Why hadn’t she and Lady been able to form that connection?

Bran smiled sadly at her before replying, “My wolf dreams only began after I fell from the tower. Running through the woods, even on four legs instead of two, was addictive for a boy who’d been told he would never walk again. I suspect that the warging was a form of escape for each of us - one that you wouldn’t have needed before Father was killed.”

Suddenly Sansa was even more aware of the cruelty of being parted with Lady so soon after having left Winterfell. She’d missed her wolf as much as her siblings while she’d been trapped in King’s Landing. There had been so many nights where she’d cried herself to sleep in the capital - wishing for her wolf, her family, even one friend to help make life bearable. Sansa shook her head to clear the memories before answering, “You know, at the time I hated Father for killing Lady, but in the years that followed I was so glad he didn’t allow Cersei the triumph of retaining her pelt. They would have used it to torture me even further in King’s Landing and it gave me some small piece of comfort that Father had sent her to be buried at Winterfell.”

Bran nodded, “I’m glad Lady made it back here, even if Summer didn’t.” He reached out and squeezed her hand, “It’s a terrible thing to lose your direwolf.”

Nodding back, Sansa sat with him in silence for a moment thinking of their wolves - dead far too young. They had been beautiful and fierce, just like their family. And just like their family, there were far too few of them left alive. She leaned down to hug Ghost again fiercely as she silently vowed to protect the family that remained to her, no matter the personal cost.

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The cool moonlight reflected off the snow as Sansa made her way to the godswood with Ghost padding faithfully by her side. “Thank you,” she whispered to the heart tree as knelt before it to pray for the safe return of Jon and Arya. Ghost’s return felt like a silent message of hope from the Old Gods that although her family was still in danger, they might yet return to her. In particular, Ghost’s reappearance felt like a promise that Jon would come back. When he had left with Dragon Queen and sent Ghost north with the Free Folk, Sansa had been afraid that his heart had left their home forever. Now that Jon’s direwolf refused to leave her side, it felt like a sign that, despite her fears, his heart might have remained at Winterfell.
As Battle Approaches

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Brienne

“She’s hateful and so am I.” The words still seemed to echo around the courtyard and mock her, even though the man who had spoken them was long gone. Vaguely she was aware that snow had begun to fall, that her hands and feet had grown cold, and that if she stayed in the courtyard for much longer, someone would probably find her out here sobbing. And yet, she couldn’t seem to force herself to move or force herself to care. He was gone. Part of her knew, deep in her bones that she would never see him again. She wept for the fate that he had chosen for himself - dying with his sister. She wept for the life that they could have spent together - safe and happy together in the north. She wept for her broken heart - crushed under the weight of his declarations of love for his sister.

Suddenly her lady was standing right in front of Brienne, looking shocked and terrified to find her sworn sword sobbing in the snow. “Brienne,” Lady Sansa gasped, “What happened? Are you hurt?”

Brienne shook her head as a distant part of her noted that she was not surprised that her lady had found her in her moment of grief. Lady Sansa seemed to know instinctively when her people needed her and had devoted much of her time throughout these past few weeks to finding the broken and hurting souls around the castle and listening to the stories of their lives and the loved ones they’d lost in the battle against the dead. Once, seeing a sheen of tears in her lady’s eyes as Brienne helped her back to the castle after she’d sat and listened to a child sobbing over the parents he’d lost, Brienne had asked why Lady Sansa did not enlist help for this task rather than carry the burden alone. Lady Sansa had merely shaken her head with a far-off look in her eyes and responded that she remembered all too well how it felt not being able to speak of her dead and she would not let her people suffer that way if she could help it.

As Brienne did not yet have any dead to speak of, she felt guilty for burdening her lady with this moment of grief and tried to pull herself together. But tears were still running down her cheeks and as soon as Lady Sansa’s hand touched her own, it broke apart the last of Brienne’s composure as she clasped her hands around her lady’s desperately, choking out a small, “he’s gone” before bursting back into tears.

Carefully Lady Sansa helped Brienne inside the castle. Everything passed in a daze and before she knew it, her lady had settled Brienne onto a bed. Vaguely she realized that they were in Lady Sansa’s chambers, but she couldn’t bring herself to focus on her surroundings as Lady Sansa wrapped her arms around Brienne and let Brienne cry herself out on her lady’s shoulder.

Finally Brienne pulled back in exhaustion and leaned against the headboard. “I loved him,” Brienne admitted in a whisper, the safety of this room and the quiet compassion of her lady pulling truths out of her that she would not have said out loud otherwise. “Why couldn’t he love me enough to stay?”

There was a brief flash of hurt in her lady’s eyes that was replaced so quickly with compassion that Brienne almost wondered if she’d seen it at all. She regretted her choice of words as soon as they were out of her mouth - they might have made Lady Sansa think of her older brother and Brienne
didn’t want to cause that pain. Her lady had fought so passionately against King Jon’s departure when he gone to meet with the Targaryen Queen and she knew that Lady Sansa blamed herself for not being able to convince him to stay. Then he had come home with that queen in tow and although Lady Sansa was usually so carefully composed, Brienne had seen her lady’s hurt in every sentence she spoke in the queen’s hearing. Brienne had often felt like she was intruding on private moments between Lady Sansa and her brother when the two of them argued passionately with one another, but she had never judged them for their feelings. Brienne knew from experience that people didn’t get to choose who they loved. And after everything her lady had been through, Brienne was glad that Lady Sansa had someone by her side that made her happy - even if it was an inappropriate relationship as far as the gods were concerned. Well, fuck the gods. If they were real, they’d poured more hardship and misery into Lady Sansa’s lap than any one person should ever have to endure. If, after all that, they judged her for wanting to stay with the one man she’d trusted and found happiness with, then those cruel gods did not deserve anyone’s loyalty.

“He doesn’t deserve you,” Lady Sansa said, pulling Brienne out of her thoughts with her earnest declaration.

“You don’t know him as I do,” Brienne told her. “Everyone sees the taint of Kingslayer, but no one knows that he only killed the Mad King because Aerys planned to destroy King’s Landing with wildfire. He…he saved me…many times. He even leapt into a bear pit with no weapons to save me. He…” Brienne paused for a moment, struggling to articulate what she wanted to say, “He’s a good man. The moment he knighted me was one of the happiest of my life and when he asked to stay with me after the battle, I thought maybe…”

She broke down again and Lady Sansa handed Brienne a soft handkerchief to wipe her eyes and waited quietly until Brienne was ready to continue.

“I thought maybe he’d listened to me and left her for good,” she said. “Tonight…he told me so many hateful things he’s done for Cersei and then he left to fight for her.” Part of Brienne’s mind screamed, How could a man like Ser Jaime stay with an awkward and homely woman such as myself? But another part - an angrier part replied, I know that he loved me; I could see that he loved me and we were happy together. He would not have thrown us away if he thought he deserved happiness. And that was truly the crux of the issue. Jaime Lannister had an honorable reason for the action that had earned him the disfavor of the realm. While the juxtaposition of earning a bad reputation for saving innocents had created a black hole of anger within his heart, the many years of hearing “Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, Man without honor,” had taken their toll. He was tainted in his own mind, and nothing Brienne had said or could say would convince him that he deserved a future of love and happiness.

“I’m sorry he treated you this way, Brienne,” her lady told her with tears sparkling unshed in her eyes. “And I’m sorry if I pushed him toward Cersei with what I said earlier today. The Lannisters were my enemies for so long that I did not think consider my words as carefully as I should have.” She leaned forward earnestly as she continued, “But you are a true highborn lady, the most honorable knight I know, and the most loyal friend that I’ve ever had. Ser Jaime might not be the man I thought he was, but he is a fool to leave you. He’ll never find anyone better to spend his time with - particularly not his sister.”

Brienne felt herself smiling at the kind words. “Thank you, my lady. I doubt that anyone else would say the same.”

Biting back a laugh, Lady Sansa told her honestly, “Anyone who’s had the pleasure of your company, or been forced to spend any time in Cersei’s, definitely would.”
Brienne did laugh for a moment at that before sobering up again, her mind still working through the conversation she’d had with Jaime Lannister before Lady Sansa had found her. “Did Ser Jaime really push your brother from that tower window?” she asked bluntly.

Biting her lip, Lady Sansa nodded in response.

Brienne was horrified at the news. She hadn’t discovered that particular fact about Jaime Lannister before she’d allowed him into her bed and she wondered how long Lady Sansa had known. It could not have been before Ser Jaime’s trial or it would have come up during that tense hour. Lord Bran must have told Lady Sansa about his fall from the tower at some point in these past few weeks after the tension of battle had worn off and he’d started spending long evenings with his sister. Had she allowed Ser Jaime to stay in Winterfell merely for Brienne’s sake after she’d found out? The things we do for love, indeed - Brienne thought to herself, recalling Lord Bran’s strange words to Ser Jaime at his trial a few weeks before. Perhaps the words had been in reference to that awful event. “I hope I haven’t betrayed your trust, my lady. I swear I didn’t know,” Brienne told her earnestly.

“You might be the only person who never has,” Lady Sansa told her honestly.

Brienne teared up at the words. Hearing that affirmation from her lady had to be one of the proudest moments of her life - for she knew Lady Sansa never would have said it if she didn’t believe it to be true.

They sat together in a comfortable silence for a few minutes before Brienne swallowed and broached the topic of her fears once again. “What if he is captured, my lady?” Brienne asked. “Queen Daenerys will not hesitate to kill him if he falls into her hands a second time.”

“If it comes to that, i will do what i can to protect him,” Lady Sansa promised in return.

There was a chance that she would never get a chance to keep that promise, but it still gave Brienne a great sense of relief to hear those words. While Queen Daenerys might have Ser Jaime killed on sight, there was another side of the Targaryen Queen that enjoyed spectacle and might keep Jaime Lannister alive so that she could kill him in front of an audience. Lady Sansa’s first priority would be the North and her family, as was only her duty, but Brienne knew that Lady Sansa would do anything short of compromising them in order to keep that promise. Brienne couldn’t help but recall the moment in the great hall mere weeks ago when a young girl had proclaimed the Targaryen Queen’s many titles to all the Northern lords and ladies - placing special emphasis on Protector of the Realm as if the queen expected applause for saving their lives after their kingdom had been sacrificed for in order to ensure her aid. Protector of the Realm, indeed. Brienne had yet to see the Targaryen Queen protect anyone for a reason that wasn’t entirely selfish. But if there was a way to save lives, even the life of someone who had harmed her family in the past, Lady Sansa would try her best. The Lady of Winterfell might not carry the title of queen but she would a protector until her last breath.

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“Thank you both for joining us here this evening, my ladies,” Lady Sansa said as she took her seat by the fire, giving a brief smile to the Manderly ladies as she picked up her sewing off the table next to her.

Lady Wylla Manderly, who had been talking to Lord Bran in his chair next to her, turned to look at the Lady of Winterfell, smirking at the formal tone with which she’d begun this meeting. “We serve
at your command, Lady Stark,” she deadpanned, which coaxed a snort from the boy next to her and a laugh from her lady sister on her other side. “Gilly was ever so sorry she had to miss the pleasure of your company tonight while she cared for her son, but we brought Bird Boy with us as a sorry replacement,” she finished, using the irreverent nickname she’d given to Lord Bran when she’d first heard that him refer to himself as the Three-Eyed Raven.

Brienne watched her lady smile in turn, amused by her friend’s comments, and felt her own lips twitching at the jest as well. Were it any other person using that tone with Lady Sansa and her brother, Brienne would have been rising to their defense, but the Manderly sisters had been staunch supporters of the Starks - particularly Lady Sansa - from the moment they arrived in Winterfell. It had been such a relief to return from King’s Landing and find that not only was Littlefinger dead and buried, but the Stark sisters had been plotting against him instead of warring amongst themselves, and Lady Sansa had found friends in the young Manderly sisters when they’d arrived shortly after his demise.

Most ladies of the north were fierce, and these two were no exception. However, Brienne knew that it was their willingness to speak their minds to their liege lady that had endeared the Manderly sisters to Lady Sansa. While most lords and ladies tiptoed around Lady Sansa’s stern countenance as leader - particularly after she’d had Lord Baelish executed - these two seemed to understand instinctively that it was her life among captors that caused the eldest stark girl hide most of her feelings and remained unoffended by it. They treated her like the young lady she was, joking with her one minute and discussing politics with her the next.

Lady Sansa had quickly taken them into her confidence, inviting them both to join herself, Arya, and Gilly for afternoons of sewing - an activity which masked her unofficial council of women from the lords who would have been otherwise offended had they known the Lady of Winterfell was seeking advice on her decisions without their input. Not only did clothing and bandages come out of that room - although never from Lady Arya, who used the time to sharpen her weapons - but these ladies offered the Lady of Winterfell sound advice on the restoration of the castle, supplies, troops, food, and any other issues brought to her by the lords and ladies in residence.

Brienne had joined them as soon as she’d returned to Winterfell, at Lady Sansa’s urging. Although Brienne had protested that she had no wise counsel to offer, Lady Sansa just smiled in response and pointed out that the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard or Queensguard attended sessions of the small council in King’s Landing. “As the commander of my own guard, you have important insights to offer at my own council sessions here in the north,” she’d told Brienne who’d been unable to refuse after that. It had been a fitting comparison to associate her council sessions with those of a monarch’s, for the Lady of Winterfell was queen in all but name. And so Brienne came, offering counsel where she could - particularly in discussions about the training of troops - but mostly listening for ways she could help with preparations for the war to come.

“Earlier today,” Lady Sansa said, pulling Brienne’s attention back to her, “one of the cooks, Mariya, went to a storeroom to get some spices and discovered that it had been ransacked. Several bushels of grain and many of the dried fruits and vegetables were missing.”

Her face shocked, Lady Wylla cried out, “But we’ve already rationed so much.”

“I’ll bet it was those Dothraki,” Lady Wynafryd said, her face displaying the same fury that her voice did. “Not only did the Dragon Queen intend to intimidate us when she came here, but she meant to starve us into submission as well.”

Despite the look of pride Lady Wylla threw toward her usually diplomatic sister after that comment, Lady Sansa’s face revealed nothing of her thoughts as she responded, “Regardless of who did it, it is
done. And I agree, Wylla, we cannot ration any further than we already are or people will start growing desperate.”

There were already rumblings throughout Winterfell of how little food there was, but no one dared openly complain about the lack of food they received - not when their lady was joining them for meals every day, refusing to take any more for herself than the smallfolk received. Men were easily shamed into good behavior, as Brienne had learned long ago, and northmen in particular understood how scarce food was during the winter. Lady Sansa’s remark was logical in that regard; there was a code of honor amongst northmen that prohibited stealing food during the winter since it might cause starvation for others later on, but desperate men rarely retained their honor.

“Are there any ships ready to sail from White Harbor?” Lady Sansa continued. “I mean to send to Braavos for the supplies we need.”

The Manderly girls exchanged a glance. “Sansa, they can be ready as soon as you need them,” Lady Wylla told her.

“But Winterfell has already suffered huge damages that will be costly to repair,” Lady Wynafryd added. “Wylla and I had already concluded that you would likely need to petition the Iron Bank of Braavos for the gold to pay for the food, grain, and glass the North desperately needs.” She paused before adding gently, “Were we correct?”

At her liege lady’s careful nod, Lady Wynafryd continued, “Since none of us want to see the North bled dry from a debt to the Iron Bank as so many other lands have been, I have another solution. I am acting head of my house while my grandfather is gone and I hope you will allow me to place White Harbor’s resources at your disposal. Trade has been good this year so we have the coin and Winterfell can forgive some of our taxes when spring returns as a means of repayment.”

Lady Sansa’s face had softened during this exchange and she swallowed before replying, “My friends, I cannot ask this of you.” She paused for a long moment, staring down at her hands as she struggled to regain her composure.

“And yet,” Lord Bran said at last, joining the conversation to save his sister from the emotional reply she clearly couldn’t get out, “the Starks are not too proud to accept help if it provides a way to save our people.”

“Yes,” Lady Sansa said softly as she finally got her voice back under control, “thank you.”

Before either Manderly sister could form a reply, the door burst open and Sam hurried in followed by an annoyed Podrick. Before Brienne could berate him for allowing anyone to interrupt, her squire looked over at her with an abashed face and said, “I’m sorry, my lady, he said it was urgent.”

“It is!” Sam insisted. He waved a parchment in front of them all so that they could clearly see the Targaryen seal on the message he held in his hands. “I thought it might contain news of the upcoming battle and no one in here wants to wait for that. I wouldn’t want to wait for it. I mean no one ever wants to wait for important messages-”

“It’s alright, Podrick,” Brienne told her squire, both to dismiss him and to cut off the nervous babbling of Samwell Tarly, who would talk forever if given half the chance. Pod nodded and exited the room to guard the door once again, leaving all of them staring at Lady Sansa as she opened two messages that were rolled together and read their contents before handing them to her brother and walking to stand in front of the fire, clasping her hands together and rubbing one thumb over her other wrist as soon as her hands were empty.
“Would you like us to leave you two alone, my lady?” Brienne asked. She stood up, part of her wanting to walk over and comfort her lady while another part ached to smash in the skull of whoever had sent a message that shook her lady up enough to bring out the nervous habit in which she so rarely indulged. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Lord Bran’s face had paled at the words written on the page.

“No, it’s alright, Brienne,” her lady replied carefully. She turned back toward them and carefully lowered her hands to her sides. “Everyone will find out soon enough. But please,” she said with a glance at Wylla and Wynafryd, “don’t speak of this until I give my leave. I don’t want to discuss it with the northern lords and ladies until after tomorrow’s battle for King’s Landing is over.”

Lord Bran did not glance up, but he read the contents of the message out loud as soon as the Manderly sisters had nodded in response.

Lady Stark of Winterfell,

The Queen’s Hand has informed me of what you told him before we left Winterfell and I have sent forth enough ravens that within a few days it will be known all across Westeros. As I suspect Queen Daenerys will soon learn of my actions, I doubt I will be able to assist you any further. While I had hoped to align myself with a good ruler before now, I regret that I was instead fooled into helping a tyrant to lay claim to the country we love. I am trying to do what little I can to make amends for my failure.

Your faithful friend and ally, Lord Varys

“Jon Snow is not my father’s son,” her lady said softly into the confused silence that followed. “He is the trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and my aunt, Lyanna Stark. And soon, all the realm will know it.”

Brienne was overwhelmed with a feeling of relief at the realization that Lady Sansa and Jon Snow were not siblings. Then she grasped the larger implications of that statement and immediately understood why Lady Sansa and her brother looked so concerned. While it was true that no one could look unfavorably on a match between cousins, that could never happen if one of them was burned alive before a wedding could take place. The former King in the North had a stronger claim to the Iron Throne than the Targaryen Queen who wanted it for herself, which could make, not only their cousin, but all of House Stark a target. They’d all seen the Targaryen Queen’s lust for power while she’d been in Winterfell and she would surely not take kindly to having her right to rule questioned by anyone.

“What does the other message say?” Lady Wylla suddenly asked, glancing over to Lord Bran’s lap where the other message still lay. Brienne could see that the other message was smudged and had clearly been written in haste right before the bird was sent. Lord Bran picked it up and read that message for them as carefully as he had the first.

You have proven yourself loyal to the true king, my lady. Do what I cannot and help him save this realm and all its people.

Lady Sansa carefully took both messages from her brother’s hands and tossed them into the fire, staring after them to make sure that they burned. “It is done then,” she announced to the room quietly. Turning to her brother, she asked, “Did she kill Varys for this?”

Lord Bran’s eyes turned white as he went to seek out that information and Brienne struggled to suppress a shiver. While she knew that the young lord only used his greensight for the benefit of the house she had sworn to protect, Brienne would always be uncomfortable with magic and Lord
Bran’s was no exception.

“You - You told Tyrin Lannister about this?” Sam ventured into the silence while they waited. He was the only one who had not been surprised by the news, Brienne noted. The rest of them were still reeling from the information but he had apparently moved on to wondering about the manner in which it had been revealed.

Lady Sansa paused before answering his question with a sigh, “Littlefinger once told me that secrets will spread more quickly than wildfire if you tell the right audience. My former husband might think himself terribly clever, but he is proud and he lacks subtlety. He will have congratulated himself on being able to spark such fondness in me that I would share this knowledge with him. Then he will have shared the information in turn, if only to boast that he’d been trusted with it.”

“And you wanted that, my lady?” Sam pressed. “Jon swore me to secrecy when I told him. Did he not ask you for the same?”

A rare flash of anger crossed Lady Sansa’s face before she slipped her mask back over her face, all trace of emotion gone within a few moments. “Jon doesn’t consider his well-being or his own self-interests of great importance, Sam,” she carefully replied. “I disagree.”

The uncomfortable silence that followed was only broken when Lord Bran’s eyes returned to their normal brown. Glancing up at his sister, he replied, “Yes, Tyrion turned Varys in a few hours ago. She made Tyrion and Jon watch as she burned her former Master of Whisperers alive.”

Brienne felt ill at the mental image, but she was not surprised. The callous way the Targaryen queen had responded with “whatever they want” when asked by Lady Sansa what dragons ate had shown them all exactly how far the queen was willing to go to get what she thought was her due. While Brienne didn’t understand how revealing the former King in the North’s identity wouldn’t protect him from a woman like that, she trusted that her lady had a plan.

“Sansa,” Lord Bran said with such fear in his voice that they all turned back to him at once, “she knew you’d shared the information. She blames you. She threatened you.”

Lady Sansa nodded back at her brother. They’d all seen the dislike between the two women while the Targaryen queen was in residence, but clearly those feelings had exacerbated by the revelation of this information to the realm.

“I will not let her harm you,” Brienne told her lady fiercely.

“Nor will I,” Lady Wylla echoed passionately.

“There is a possibility that the North will not wish to fight for Jon given his heritage - particularly since he gave up his crown,” Lady Wynafryd said honestly. She’d clearly been ruminating over all the implications of how the news would affect the realm and not just her friends. “But they will protect you no matter the cost. We all will stand with House Stark as long as there is breath in our bodies.”

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Watching Lady Sansa stare off the edge of the rampart, Brienne realized she was slowly losing feeling in her feet. While she knew neither of them would be getting any sleep tonight as they
worried over the fates of Arya and the men they loved, she was starting to grow concerned that Lady Sansa wasn’t dressed warmly enough to continue this silent vigil outside. “My lady,” Brienne finally ventured hesitantly, “Are you looking for something out here? Can I help you in any way?”

Turning, Lady Sansa offered her guard a small smile, motioning for Brienne to join her. “This is the exact spot,” she told Brienne as she turned back around to gaze out into the snows beyond Winterfell, “where Theon and I jumped to escape the Boltons when we ran from Winterfell. At the time we didn’t know if we were jumping to death or life, but we knew that either fate would be kinder to us than than the Bolton bastard.”

It was her fault, Brienne knew. She’d promised to protect Lady Sansa, had watched faithfully for the light until Stannis Baratheon’s army had appeared. Although she didn’t regret being able to dispense justice in Renly’s name, she had been horrified to discover that she had missed the signal when Lady Sansa finally lit a candle in the Broken Tower while Brienne was busy searching for him. Unable to keep the choke out of her voice, Brienne said, “I’m sorry I wasn’t here, my lady. I didn’t mean to fail you.”

“No, Brienne!” Lady Sansa replied, her tone sharp but her eyes kind. “You have never once failed me. And this place does not remind me of failure; it reminds me that even in the hardest times, I have the courage within me to keep fighting.

Pausing for a moment, Lady Sansa seemed to consider how best to put her thoughts into words before she sighed and continued, “But tonight, that courage feels completely out of reach. Perhaps because of my fears for my family, perhaps because I can do nothing to keep them safe in tomorrow’s battle, or perhaps it was Theon who lent me that courage and I can’t reach it now that he’s…”

Gone. Just like so many members of her family, the young Greyjoy man was gone. Brienne would never understand how Lady Sansa had found it within herself to forgive Theon Greyjoy after he betrayed her family, but they seemed to have been bound by their escape from the hell they’d endured here. Brienne herself had not been able to harbor any feelings of resentment toward the man after he’d saved her lady’s life.

“Lady Sansa,” Brienne finally said into the silence, “I once told your mother that she had a woman’s kind of courage, before I pledged myself to her. But yours surpasses hers - surpasses…anyone’s that I’ve ever seen. You can face this, as I’ve always seen you face everything else.”

Her lady seemed to glow upon hearing that and Brienne was glad that her words could offer some measure of comfort on this restless night. Lady Sansa reached over to place a hand on Brienne’s shoulder, meeting Brienne’s eyes as she replied, “Thank you, Brienne, and thank you for reminding me that I can be strong as my lady mother always was.”

Sighing, Lady Sansa moved her small hand to grasp Brienne’s and looked back out at the night sky. “Tomorrow will be a trial for both of us, but we will face it together.”

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Hours later, the small hall was filled with the ladies of the north, a few injured lords, and the young sons or daughters of houses whose other representation had died or ridden south with Jon. Some were quietly talking to each other, but many more waited in tense silence. After watching Lady
Sansa made polite inquiries and conversation with most of the lords and ladies in the crowded hall, Brienne was beginning to feel at her wit’s end. She wished the two of them could have stayed in the godswood with Lord Bran, but he would not be able to share the details of the battle until it was over. And in the meantime, her lady had declared, the northerners needed the comfort of seeing the Lady of Winterfell amongst them as they waited out this excruciating day to receive news of their loved ones’ fates in the battle raging over King’s Landing. Brienne knew it would be difficult to offer them any sort of comfort today; the northern lords and ladies were as harsh as their lands and had no interest in false comforts. Yet Lady Sansa navigated her way around the room in a way that made it look easy.

“Lady Barbrey,” Lady Sansa asked, walking up to to one of the only tables they had yet to visit, “how is young Brandon’s arm healing?”

“Very well, Lady Sansa,” the stern lady of House Dustin replied, “your stitching closed up the cuts perfectly and your brother’s care has been good enough that I have not had to make one visit to any loathsome maester to ensure proper treatment for my son.”

Lady Sansa smiled back as she replied, “I’m glad to hear Bran’s been doing such excellent work. If you’ve no objection, I shall pass along your compliments. I hope your son continues to recover quickly.”

The stern lady gave no reply, but her eyes seemed to soften as she gave Lady Sansa a stern nod in reply before turning to allow a serving girl to fill her cup. Brienne wasn’t sure what had transpired between them, but she was glad to see that Lady Barbrey no longer seemed to be at odds with her lady.

Suddenly Lady Wylla was at Lady Sansa’s side, excusing the two of them politely from Lady Barbrey’s company with assurances that she needed to ask the Lady of Winterfell a question about dinner, and all but dragging Lady Sansa out the door of the hall before she could utter a word of protest.

“You’ve done enough lady-ing for a little while,” Lady Wylla told Lady Sansa as the two of them walked out the door, Lady Wynafryd and Brienne close on their heels. “We’re here to save you from the tedium of providing comfort - if only for a few minutes.”

Smirking at her friend’s words as they all walked toward the kitchens, Lady Sansa replied, “You know, the tension in that room was starting to remind me of the hall in which I spent the night during the Battle of the Blackwater. Queen Cersei spent most of her time trying to get as drunk as humanly possible so I ended up leading the ladies of the court in song. Can you imagine the look on Lady Barbrey’s face if I did the same here?”

Lady Wylla laughed as Lady Wynafryd grinned and said, “She’d think you had lost your mind. Then she and Lady Jonelle would probably call for a vote to have you locked away for your insanity.”

“We, of course, would have no choice but to agree with her,” Lady Wylla snorted in response.

Lady Sansa gave a mock sigh and threw her braid over her shoulder as she replied teasingly, “I hear I’m not the only one that’s lost their mind. Was that a she-bear I saw you kissing a few days ago, Wylla? What would your grandfather say?”

“He’d say that it was inappropriate since she is neither wed nor Dornish,” Lady Wynafryd said dryly.
“And then I’d tear up about how afraid I was for the men down south,” Lady Wylla responded, waving a hand mockingly in front of her face as if fighting her emotions, “and he’d be so aghast at my tears that he’d forget he was scolding me in the first place.”

Lady Sansa rolled her eyes as she pushed open the door to the kitchen and turned to converse quietly with one of the cooks for a few minutes. “The real question,” Lady Sansa said to Lady Wylla in mock-seriousness as she rejoined them and led the way back toward the hall where the other lords and ladies were waiting, “is who was the bear in question?”

Before Lady Wylla was even halfway through describing the other member of her tryst, Brienne saw Maester Wolkan pushing Lord Bran’s chair back toward the hall, Ghost trailing like a silent shadow behind them.

Her lady’s face paled and, before any of them could say a word, she took off running toward her brother. Brienne charged after her immediately and the Manderly sisters followed close on her heels.

“Are Jon and Arya alive?” Brienne heard Lady Sansa demanding as she caught up, watching the dignified lady of Winterfell fall to her knees in front of Lord Bran’s chair in her desperation for news.

Still staring at his hands, Lord Bran gave a small nod but seemed unable to speak just yet. Lady Sansa reached up to rest a hand on his arm and when he glanced at her they could all see the tracks of tears on his face. Brienne’s stomach dropped. She’d thought she might lose Jaime Lannister, but she’d never seriously entertained the thought that they could lose this battle to Queen Cersei.

Apparently Lady Sansa had not thought it possible either, “Bran what happened?” she asked, gripping his hands desperately. “Did we lose the battle?”

Lord Bran lifted his eyes to Brienne and the Manderly sisters and seemed to decide that telling them everything as quickly as possible was the best way to handle the situation. “Sansa,” he whispered sounding so young, “it wasn’t a battle; it was a massacre. Daenerys and her dragon destroyed the… fleet and armies in King’s Landing in a matter of minutes. But when the people tried to surrender… she rained down dragon fire on them, burning down the Red Keep…and half the city…” His voice broke as he started to cry again, lost in the images of all he had seen while they stared at him in mute horror. None of them had any special love for King’s Landing, but no city deserved such a horrifying fate, particularly not after its people had tried to surrender.

The oppressive silence was finally broken by Lady Wynafryd’s voice asking, “What about our men?”

Pulling himself together, Lord Bran responded, “Jon pulled the northern troops out of the city when he realized what was happening, so most of them are still alive.” The foreboding words ‘for now’ seemed to hang in the air before their eyes.

My lady was right about the Dragon Queen, Brienne thought bitterly, glancing down to where Lady Sansa was wiping away a tear with one hand while the other remained firmly in her brother’s grasp. Her lady was almost always right in her judgement - particularly when it came to the characters of those around her. Why can’t someone surprise her just once by being better than she expects?

Shaking her head to clear it, Lady Wylla asked almost desperately, “Did Lord Manderly make it out alive?”

After watching Lord Bran give an affirmative nod, Brienne knew he would know the answer to her
own question. Her chest had constricted though and Brienne could not get out the words.

Seeing Brienne falter, Lady Sansa did not hesitate to ask, “Did Ser Jaime?”

“No,” Lord Bran replied, so quietly that she almost missed it.

Brienne had thought that when she faced this moment, a part of her would shatter, but she felt nothing now that her fears had been confirmed. Perhaps she’d finished her grieving over the course of the last few weeks, knowing deep in her heart that she’d never seen him again. Or perhaps she would feel the full force of that pain later. For now though, she resolved as she felt Lady Sansa slip her free hand into Brienne’s own, she would focus on caring for her lady.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Lady Sansa asked her brother quietly as Brienne helped her to her feet. As he shook his head, she let go of Brienne’s hand and reached down to hug her brother fiercely.

“I know you have to go back in there,” Lord Bran whispered into his sister’s hair, “but I can’t face all the questions right now.”

“Of course,” Lady Sansa agreed. She glanced up to the Manderly sisters and asked, “Would one of you mind staying with him until I am free to do so?”

“I will,” Lady Wylla offered. Her eyes were still terribly sad, but she seemed determined to help distract the young Stark boy from the horrors of what he had seen. “Come on, Bird Boy, let’s go for a walk and you can explain to me once again how your mystical powers work - perhaps in a way that makes sense this time.”

Lord Bran’s lips twitched faintly as he heard what was clearly a familiar joke between the two of them, “They’re hardly mystical,” he told Lady Wylla as she pushed his chair away. Ghost nuzzled against Lady Sansa’s knee before padding silently behind them, The direwolf clearly understood that Lord Bran needed him most right now and that the orders Lady Sansa had given him last night to stay with her brother were still in effect.

“I’ll give you a moment,” Lady Wynafryd told her friend kindly before slipping in the door of the hall as Lady Sansa watched their siblings go. After the news they’d just heard, she must have been as eager as Lady Sansa to have a moment alone to compose herself.

Brienne instinctively grasped Lady Sansa’s hand once more and gave it a quick squeeze, echoing her lady’s words from the night before, “We will face it together.”

Looking for a moment as if she wanted to start crying again, Lady Sansa squeezed Brienne’s hand back and nodded. Then, as she squared her shoulders, Brienne watched her lady carefully wipe all the sadness from her face and settle the mantle of Lady of Winterfell over her shoulders before heading for the door. For a moment, Brienne saw a fierceness in her lady that made her believe all the rumors she’d once heard about the family who led the North - Lady Sansa was not just a Stark, she was a wolf.
Sorry this chapter took so long, darlings! Not only have the past few weeks been unusually busy, but I also wrote the entire chapter, then decided it should be written from a different POV, and had to rewrite it entirely. The next chapters should come more quickly as I already have portions of them written.

Speaking of the next chapters, I promise they will contain the beginnings of the actual plot. But I thought it was important to focus on what was happening in the North before/during the battle before I moved on to the aftermath of what happens in King’s Landing. Plus I missed being able to see positive interactions between my babies so I indulged myself a little with this chapter.

On another note, thank you so much for all your lovely likes, subscriptions, and comments! Your responses to my fic have inspired me so much these past few weeks! I love you all so much! <3 Feel free to leave any comments here or to send any comments or questions to me via my Tumblr. (I’ve also been making edits for each chapter, which you can find here.)
Jon tasted ash in his mouth and he knew that if he lived a thousand years he would never be rid of it. It was the taste of grief, of horror, of destruction. It was the taste of death. All he saw were bodies littered as far as the eye could see and the fires - ceaseless fires - burning away every good thing that this world had once held.

The northern armies had not been necessary for the battle, in fact none of the armies had been. Daenerys could have conquered the world with her dragon alone. It had broken something inside of Jon to watch the people of King’s Landing be slaughtered by sword in the streets as fire rained down to consume them from above. He was haunted by the knowledge that he and his men had participated in this massacre. Soldiers trying to surrender, women, and even children had fallen victim to the blades of his own troops. *How could I have let this happen?* he’d wondered as he stared at the fighting in numb disbelief. *What have we become?*

The only thing that had kept him from commanding an immediate retreat had been the look in Grey Worm’s eyes - a look that told him if he left at that moment, the Unsullied would destroy the Northerners as surely as they were destroying the city. And then the dance of fighting had begun. Jon had still tried to give the men around him a chance to surrender, crying out for everyone to stop. Trying to halt a battle once it had started, however, was like trying to stop a flood with your bare hands. The sword raised in defense of his own life had kept any Lannister soldiers from believing that he didn’t want to harm them. He had done his best to save any civilians he could, but it would still never be enough. Eventually the dragonfire had found caches of wildfire that had long ago been hidden under the city by the Mad King and Jon refused to fight for one more moment. Sheathing Longclaw, he ordered his men out of the city while Daenerys had fulfilled the legacy of destruction her father had left for her.

Jon glanced down at the child he held in his arms, the one he had grabbed on his way through the streets as he screamed for his men to fall back. He was glad the Northmen had followed his lead and were helping civilians out of the city as they ran. He tasted bile in the back of his throat as he saw another building fall and heard screams that were cut painfully short. He ran faster, urging his men on as quickly as he could.

Soon they were outside the city and heading for their camp. He set down the child he had carried out of the city and allowed himself one brief moment to fall apart - to breathe in the death around him and breathe out the grief - before pulling himself back together and letting the weight of command settle on his shoulders once again. The men surrounding him looked dazed, but Jon could not afford time for grief right now. *I wish Sansa could tell me what to do,* he thought. But it did no good to wish for her wisdom in this hell of a city that she’d sworn never to set foot in again. He was glad she could not see it now - was glad she was on the other side of Westeros and far away from Daenerys and her dragons.

“Ser Davos,” he called out, letting his voice ring with the confidence of a king. His people needed
their leader right now and Jon, who had already failed them in so many ways, could not fail them now. “Find the lords and have them assemble in the command tent. I need to speak with them.”

Jon did not head straight to the meeting he had called, but instead walked to the water’s edge in a daze and stood staring into the distance, away from the burning city. He needed to formulate a plan, but his mind refused to come up with one. The chaos of the city falling at his back was almost drowned out in the as echoes from the past rose up to haunt and mock him.

“Half the men hate you already, do it!” Maester Aemon had told him long ago, before saying, “Kill the boy, and let the man be born.” He’d listened to that advice, and oh how dearly it had cost him. First his life and then his crown. He’d traded both to try to save lives innocent lives from the army of the dead, but now he wondered just how many in King’s Landing had died because he’d let Daenerys rush them out of the North and towards her own war. Visions of fire consuming Winterfell had haunted his dreams every night after the Night King was gone and he’d allowed them to chase him away before tensions between her and Sansa could escalate to the point of no return. Now an entire city had been destroyed and he wondered if all those innocent lives might have been spared had he insisted they wait at least long enough to gather intelligence - long enough that Daenerys might not have suffered the loss of her dragon and friend in the surprise attack by Euron’s fleet.

“Let it be fear,” Daenerys had announced to him the night before. Perhaps she’d meant to burn King’s Landing as soon as she realized the people would not love her. Perhaps if he had never pretended to love her or perhaps if he’d been able to keep up the pretense, it would have stayed her hand. He might never know what would have happened, but his sins had been paid for in blood by an entire city filled with people and Jon would never stop being haunted by that knowledge.

“You know nothing, Jon Snow,” Ygritte taunted. “I do know some things,” Jon had once told her long ago. Now he wondered if she hadn’t been correct in her assessment. He’d tried so hard to do the right thing, to save the North from the threat that had drowned out all others in his mind. He had tried so hard to remind Daenerys of the good queen she claimed to be, but his advice had fallen on deaf ears as Daenerys realized he did not love her. He wondered if without that betrayal he could have tempered her lust for blood, even if he could never have sated her lust for power. But pretending to love her had no longer been possible after her reaction to the news of his identity.

“You have to be smarter than Father. You need to be smarter than Robb. I loved them; I miss them, but they made stupid mistakes and they both lost their heads for it,” Sansa warned him, her eyes intense with a fear that he’d never seen in them before as her hand on his arm locked him in place even as it sent a fire blazing through his body. He hadn’t wanted to address how seeing that fear and feeling her touch had twisted his gut and made him long to promise once again that he would protect her. But it wasn’t herself she was afraid for. It was his life she feared would be snatched out of her hands by their enemies and that she knew he would trade in a heartbeat for the North or for her own. He was king and he could not promise to protect himself when there were so many depending on him. Instead Jon had focused on the anger that had still been rolling around in his gut and lashed out at her, saying, “And how should I be smarter? By listening to you?” Sansa had surprised him by keeping her mask down so that he could see the hurt in her eyes. It was not often she let it show and he instantly regretted his harsh comment when she merely sighed and responded, “Would that be so terrible?” They had been interrupted before Jon could properly form an apology, but he had spent the next few weeks trying to show her how much he valued her advice before he’d left for Dragonstone. The one thing Jon had not been able to agree with her on was their need for the Targaryen Queen. And so he’d gone to Dragonstone to negotiate with Daenerys, although he wished he could have stayed in Winterfell and never left Sansa’s side. But the Night King would have killed his people, would have killed her, without Daenerys’ help and Jon had sworn to keep both of them safe. Now as he covered his face with his hands, he wondered how many had died in King’s
Landing today. Daenerys would not hesitate to do the same to Winterfell if he gave her cause. He had to be smarter; he had to think like Sansa.

Thoughts of Sansa reminded him of the conversation he’d had with Daenerys the night before about how Sansa had shared the secret of his identity. He’d been so afraid for her at the time that he hadn’t been able to truly ponder the reasons she might have done it. But perhaps this was why Sansa had shared his secret; the Targaryen name he loathed might be the tool he needed to protect them all. He turned and headed straight for the command tent, pulling all the titles that he had ever earned, that had ever mattered to him - Lord Commander, King in the North, Warden of the North, and family to the Starks of Winterfell - around him like the armor he would need to give his orders.

His men were assembled in the tent as requested, some looking weary, a few showing a trace of fear, while others looked ashamed. Were they shamed by their actions in the city or that they had been there at all? For a moment, Jon wondered what was showing on his own face; it felt as though all emotions had been drained from his body the moment they’d arrived back in the camp. The only reason he was still standing was because of his burning need to help his people escape the danger they were in.

“My Lords,” he said briskly, nodding to them all. “We need to discuss how best to protect our people.” They were staring at him, clearly shocked that this is how the conversation was starting after all the devastation they had witnessed. “They-”

“Protect them? Cersei Lannister has been defeated. The war is over, is it not?” Lord Cerwyn asked, looking slightly dazed.

Jon sighed and pinched his brow. He had been so caught up in his thoughts that he had forgotten people would need an explanation in order to properly understand his fears. “By now some of you might have heard rumors that my father was Rhaegar Targaryen,” he told them. “Queen Daenerys is paranoid that people will want me for their ruler instead of her and I fear what she will do to our homes after seeing her wrath poured out on King’s Landing today.”

Muttering broke out around the room at this overload of information. Jon glanced at his Hand in a silent appeal to reclaim their attention but saw that Davos was as staggered by this information as everyone else. “Listen!” he finally shouted out, pulling their attention back to him. “I wish to save as many men of the North and the Vale as possible but I am afraid to send you all away without Queen Daenerys flying her dragon to our lands and delivering her own brand of justice.”

Jon glanced around the room and saw Lord Manderly gazing at Jon without a trace of the fear Jon saw on most of the other faces. “You’re Lyanna Stark’s son, aren’t you?” the gruff lord inquired.

“‘I am,’” Jon replied, bitterness and pride mixing on his tongue at the thought.

The old lord nodded to himself at the confirmation. “The she-wolf of Winterfell was loved by all, and I will follow her son to the grave if he needs me to,” he declared to the lords in the room before turning back to Jon, “I know what you are asking, my Lord. You need faces Queen Daenerys will recognize to stay behind in case she means to make an example of us. I have two granddaughters back home to carry on my name; it would be my honor to die to protect them and to protect the North if need be.”

Lord Locke rose to his feet, saying, “My old bones have been waiting to die since my son was killed fighting for King Robb. I will stay as well.”

“As will I,” Lord Royce declared. “My face is the only one from the Vale this Dragon Queen ever made any note of.” He did not mention the fact that this was because of his loyalty to Sansa, but he
did not have to. The friction between the two women had been well-noted during Daenerys’ stay at Winterfell and she had been cold to any she deemed loyal to the Lady of Winterfell. “And my son is ready to be a lord should I fall here.”

Jon nodded his gratitude at each one of them. “The North will remember your courage,” he told them quietly. “As for the rest of you, I want to see each of you individually so I can give you instructions on where to go. I mean to send each lord on a different journey home so that not all of you can be taken should Queen Daenerys figure out our plan and I wish you to be able to honestly say you have no idea where the others are if you are captured.”

They all nodded their ascent, as Lord Tallhart finally gave voice to the thought that still troubled Jon, “Which men are we to take home with us?”

Jon closed his eyes briefly, feeling the weight of so many lives hanging in the balance of his decision. “Please tell the men that Queen Daenerys and I wish for any man with a young wife or child to be able to return to them right away. We would also like any young man under twenty to return home to help with the repairs that need to be made to homes and castles in the North after the fight against the dead. The rest will stay on for a little longer to ensure peace returns to the realm.” He felt bile in his throat at the thought of all the men he might not be able to save. Glancing around, he saw that same horror reflected in their eyes, but they nodded back at him.

The weight of all these lives was staggering. “I never wanted a crown,” he had all but shouted at Sansa during the last conversation they’d managed to have alone while he was in Winterfell. That had not strictly been true, although he had not wanted to bear the burden of that responsibility by the time he was finally given one. Despite his many mistakes, people kept choosing Jon to lead them and he needed to protect them in whatever way he could.

“Tell your men nothing else,” he commanded urgently. “I will do all I can to save those who are left, but we cannot afford desertion among the ranks after so many are gone nor can we afford men who might decide they want to exchange the lives of those around them for the favor of a queen.” Politics might be Sansa’s area of expertise, but Jon knew well the bitterness of betrayal and he hoped he was not making a mistake in trusting these lords.

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Within an hour, Jon had given each lord his orders and arranged for commands over the men who were heading home without their lords. He sighed and gently rested his head in his hands as the last of them headed out of the command tent to prepare for their journey home. He needed to go back to the city, but he did not feel ready to face the horror of all the dead just yet. Suddenly, some of Sansa’s words floated back to him, “When I was trapped in King’s Landing, I would often remind myself that I must be as strong as my lady mother and it felt as though she lent me strength.” At the time, Jon had been bitterly reminded of Lady Catelyn’s hatred for him, but now he found himself thinking of his own mother. He wished he had been given a chance to know her, to draw on a strength that he knew instead of one he merely imagined. But he had heard enough stories of Lyanna Stark that he felt as though he did know her, particularly since people had always compared Arya to her. She had been beautiful, wild, and fierce - with the wolf blood flowing through her veins.

Jon thought of her statue in the crypts of Winterfell, right next to the man he’d always thought of as his father. He drew strength from their presence, as he had when he had stood in front of those statues not long ago. A conversation he’d had with Theon on Dragonstone - so long ago it felt like
another lifetime - came back to him then. “Our father was more of a father to you than yours ever was...he’s a part of you, just like he’s a part of me,” he heard himself saying. He smiled bitterly to himself as he thought of the next thing he’d told Theon, “You don’t need to choose. You’re a Greyjoy and you’re a Stark.” Someone could have said those words back to Jon after he’d discovered his identity as the trueborn son of a Targaryen, but it would never be the impossible choice for Jon that it had been for Theon. He had chosen a long time ago. He might not be a Stark, but he would fight for the Starks, now and always.

Suddenly Davos rushed into the tent, interrupting his thoughts, “Jon,” he said sharply. “They found your sister!”

His heart pounding, Jon was out of the tent and running before he had fully processed that he did not know where to go. He turned around and saw Davos urging him in the direction of the medics tent and took off in that direction. Entering that tent was perhaps even worse than being in the city had been. It was a hellscape of burns, blood, and screams. Feeling dizziness threaten to overtake him, Jon forced himself to run past the men who had been burned or wounded in the battle as he looked frantically for his sister. Suddenly he spotted a skinny sword at the side of one of the cots. “Arya!” he yelled, running over to take her hand. Bandages had been wrapped around her head, and he could see blood soaking through a few spots. She was covered in ash all over her body, and the nurses had clearly been so busy they hadn’t even bothered to entirely clean her face, only to wipe away enough blood to make sure there were no injuries underneath. “What happened to her?” he demanded.

“They don’t know,” Davos muttered, coming up behind him. “She must have escaped the city somehow and tried to make it back here. No one knows how long she was outside the camp, but some of the men found her lying on the ground. When they recognized her, they brought her here.”

He heard another man clear his throat behind them and tore his gaze away from Arya’s face long enough to register a cloak and chain behind him. “Maester,” he said firmly, “What’s wrong with her? Will she be alright?”

“We don’t know, my lo- Your Grace,” the maester told him. “It appears that she lost quite a bit of blood before we found her. She will need rest.”

Jon swallowed around the lump in his throat, remembering sitting by the bedside of another sibling after another fall. It had taken Bran over a month to wake up and Jon could not afford to have Arya stay here that long. He would not allow her to become a prisoner of Daenerys. There would be enough lives that Jon would have to bargain for, he could not allow his sister’s to hang in that balance as well. It would be safer for her, safer for them all, if she were gone within the hour.

“Your Grace?” He heard the man say hesitantly behind him, shuffling his feet. “Did you have any other questions for me?”

Why was she here? Why did she come? Why couldn’t I protect her just this once? There were so many questions that Jon wanted to ask, but he knew the answers could only be given by the girl who lay unconscious before him. Jon closed his eyes and pressed a gentle kiss against his sister’s cheek. “Forgive me,” he whispered.

He collected himself as he stood up and turned to face the man, donning the mantle of King once again. “We don’t have time for her to rest here. She needs to head straight home to Winterfell. Can you give someone instructions on how best to care for her?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” the man replied quickly.

“Good,” Jon said. “Please prepare whatever medicines might be needed for her care.”
He motioned for his Hand to follow him out of the tent. “Davos,” he said softly when they were out of earshot of any of his men. “Will you find a way to get her safely out of here? To get her safely back to Winterfell?”

“Oh of course,” Davos responded readily. “I am a decent smuggler.”

Jon nodded. “When you get to Winterfell, tell Sansa I’m sorry.”

“Your Grace,” Davos asked then with trepidation. “What are you planning?”

Shaking his head bitterly to himself, Jon looked at the city. His feet had already begun the long walk towards the devastation, even as his mind screamed at him to get out. “I’m going to meet with Queen Daenerys,” he told Davos. “I thought I could control her worst impulses but-”

Unable to finish that line of thought, he gestured to the cloud of smoke rising from the Red Keep - a clear sign to all of Jon’s failure. He glanced over to his Hand, remembering their conversation when Jon had been brought back to life. In that moment of doubt when he’d mentioned his failure, Davos had told him to “go fail again.” Davos must have had a similar line of thought because he pulled Jon into a hug as he muttered, “Don’t fail again.”

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The skulls of dragons, some smashed and shattered, but many intact enough to be recognizable, had been arranged between the pillars in the throne room. An Unsullied guard stood at attention between each one, forming a terrifying path leading up to the Iron Throne where Daenerys was waiting. Although the ceiling had partially collapsed and there was rubble scattered throughout the room, the throne that she had coveted for so long remained intact. The two guards who had escorted him to this audience now stood flanking him, awaiting their queen’s instructions.

Before he’d been summoned to the throne room, Jon had been held captive for an entire day, stuck in one of the few rooms in the Red Keep that had not been destroyed by dragon flames. He’d spent the long hours of the day pacing the room, trying to figure out exactly what to say to Daenerys. It was only during the endless hours of that night that Jon had finally let the feelings of anguish and horror consume him. He’d been heartbroken for the city and for all the charred bodies he’d seen in the streets. And Jon had grieved for the honor of the North and for an innocence that Jon hadn’t known he still possessed. Battles and wars were always ugly and after every single one Jon had been so heartbroken over the death and suffering that he’d never realized before that he took a certain amount of pride in fighting for the right side. He’d known if he died at least he would die for something he believed in. Not so with this battle.

It seemed that the whole city wept with him as tears of blood consumed them all. The screams of the dead and dying echoed through his ears. Worse still were the cries of the grieving, those who were cursed to live through this hell. That was a curse Jon well understood. Part of him wished his body had died along with what felt like the last piece of his soul in the massacre this city had just endured. Another part of him wished to execute the woman who had murdered so many for her own twisted purposes - but he’d been relieved of his weapons before being escorted into the rooms that Jon was sure would become his prison. After their conversation the night before the battle, Jon knew Daenerys would never allow him to come into her presence with weapons ever again. A distant part of Jon had prayed to the old gods that they would strike down the queen who had caused such suffering. But he was in the south, and the old gods had no weirwood eyes to see in this place. They
could not help him now.

“Jon Snow,” Daenerys said, leaning forward to address him. Her voice contained all the coldness of the grave; the only warmth in this room was the fire he could see dancing in her eyes. “Why were your men outside the city when the battle was won?”

“I commanded them to fall back,” Jon stated evenly.

She glared at him as she straightened in her seat; the halo of swords around her head was a silent warning to all who would dare seek an audience with this killer who had declared herself queen. “Without the knowledge or consent of your queen.”

“Yes,” Jon replied simply. Now was not the time to play the lover or the Northern fool. He somehow managed to keep the contempt out of his voice, but just barely. “Over half of them had died in the fires throughout the city.” Out of the corner of his eye he saw Grey Worm flinch, but Jon forced his gaze to remain firmly fixed on Daenerys. “I swore to protect the Northerns, Your Grace, and I saw no cause to let more die when the city had already fallen to-”

“You swore to follow Daenerys Stormborn,” Grey Worm cut in savagely. “And yet you tried to hold your men back from battle.”

“I did,” Jon stated, reining in his anger. He’d spent so long in captivity that he was starting to wonder what it would feel like not to hold his tongue, but to once again have the luxury of losing his temper. “After the people surrendered. I was told that if the bells rang, we would stop fighting. Did these plans change at some point?”

“They did,” Daenerys responded coolly. “When I decided they did. It is not your place to question the orders of your queen.” She glared at him, a peculiar sadness haunting her eyes for a moment before it was pushed aside under a wave of fury. “While we freed this city from the grip of a tyrant, you were not there to help us claim this victory. So what should stop me from ordering to have you killed right here and now for not upholding your end of the bargain we made?” she asked him, false sweetness dripping from her voice like poison.

“You could, but it would not be a wise decision,” Jon told her. He knew she wanted him to grovel and beg. He had seen the thrill of power she felt at holding another’s life in her hands, but he could not afford to play that game with her. He only had one card left to play and he meant to use it to save his people.

Her nostrils flared. “Now you dare tell me how to run my kingdoms.”

“Jon Snow is correct,” a voice suddenly said behind him.

Daenerys’ glare immediately shifted to the man entering the room behind Jon. “No one asked for your opinion.”

“No,” the voice replied coming forward. Once Tyrion came level with him, Jon could see that the Queen’s Hand had his wrists bound in chains and there were two Unsullied guards flanking him. He wondered what the man had done to Daenerys to warrant such treatment. In spite of his bindings, he walked as though he did not have a care in the world. “But you should listen to my advice all the same.”

“I have plenty of men to give me advice, men who have not betrayed me.” Daenerys shot back scornfully. “I promised you that this failure would be your last.”

“My queen,” Tyrion said respectfully. The very words made Jon taste bile in the back of his throat.
He’d said them so many times in the hopes of winning her help or pacifying her in a sick attempt to keep her bloodlust at bay. Part of him wanted to interrupt this conversation, but he decided to wait and see if he could somehow use Tyrion’s words for his own benefit.

“I would advise against that as well,” Tyrion continued. “I did not mean to betray you, merely to repay a debt that I owed to my brother. He once helped me escape captivity and it was my turn to do the same. More to my point though, despite your great wisdom, you do not know much about Westeros—”

“And now you would blame me for growing up in Essos after the Usurper tried to murder me?” Daenerys cut in viciously.

Tyrion smiled sadly, “No one could blame you for that, my queen. But you have not been here long, and there are many customs and laws that your people will expect you to uphold and follow. They will lend you more support if you understand their ways.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, “They will support me regardless or they will suffer the fate of King’s Landing.”

A chill ran down Jon’s spine at the words. When he’d pretended to kneel to Daenerys as his queen, he’d told her that his people would see her for what she was. They had seen a small piece of the power-hungry, vicious woman he’d discovered on Dragonstone, but none of them - except maybe Sansa - had truly understood how far she was willing to go to gain power. But now, the whole world would see and know. Daenerys had lit King’s Landing like a beacon and it would signal to everyone in Westeros just what type of tyrant had come to claim them.

With a small bow, Tyrion agreed, “Yes they will, Your Grace, but your people will love you for making the effort to understand them. And who else but me is left to advise you about Westeros?”

Daenerys flinched at the end of his speech as if she’d been struck, but she did not order the guards to take him away. Instead she leveled her gaze on Tyrion and demanded, “Why do you think it would not be wise for me to kill this coward who ran away from my battle?”

Jon stiffened at the accusation but refrained from speaking. There were far more important things at stake right now than his honor.

“In all of Westeros, from Dorne to the Wall, none is so accursed as the kinslayer,” Tyrion replied without even bothering to glance at Jon. “The whole realm has just been informed that you two are related. If you were to kill him now you would be seen as a kinslayer at best and a usurper at worst. We do not want to give people cause to question your reign.”

Daenerys had never looked so intent on murder as she did in that moment when it was denied to her. “Fine,” she snapped, motioning guards forward to flank Jon. “Escort Jon Snow back to his chambers.” She turned toward Grey Worm as she commanded, “Find his men and execute all who left the battle without my leave.”

“No!” Jon all but shouted into the room. She fixed the burning coals of her eyes on him, clearly hoping that he would give her a reason to allow the fires raging within to consume him. “They acted under my orders. They could never have known that those orders didn’t come from you. Please, Da-Your Grace. If you let the northmen go home and leave my cousins and North unharmed, I will renounce my claim to the throne and declare you as the rightful queen for all the world to hear.”

Upon hearing those words, Daenerys finally stood, stalking slowly down the steps with the air of a predator. “I am the rightful queen.”
It took Jon a moment to reign in his terror that his plan would fail and his people would suffer for it. He closed his eyes and breathed out, picturing the woman he believed would make the best queen of Westeros. “You are,” he told Daenerys with as much conviction as he could muster. “Please, Your Grace, let the Northmen go home. I will stay to publicly give up my claim and soon all of Westeros will see you for the queen you are.”

Daenerys looked slightly pacified. The fires had receded slightly, but they still lingered as she continued to stare at him.

“Very well,” she told him. Turning back to Grey Worm she announced, “Bring the lords of the North and the Vale into the city. They will remain as our guests in the Red Keep. The remaining Northmen can be sent home.” She turned to face them again and flicked her eyes over to her Hand. “Arrange for my coronation. My nephew will renounce his claim on the day I am crowned and all of Westeros will bend the knee.”

Her gaze locked back on Jon and she smiled at him - a smile that spoke of death and chilled him to the bone. “I want Sansa Stark to come bend the knee then as well. You will write to your cousin and summon her to King’s Landing.”

For a moment Jon couldn’t breathe as he heard echoes of “Now she knows what happens when people hear the truth about you.” The sound of “Dracarys” rang in his ears while Sansa burned before his eyes. “No,” he croaked, trying to get the words out despite the ash in his throat. “Your Grace, she’s only the Lady of Winterfell. The North will honor my decision. Surely it’s not necessary-”

“Necessary?” Daenerys breathed in scorn, her smile reaching her eyes as she noted his obvious terror. “I have decreed it and she will find it necessary to obey my command or I will march North once again. This time it will not be to fight alongside your people.”

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Jon stared down at his hands, trying to think of how to possibly word his message to Sansa. There was so much he needed to convey to her since he had no idea how much she already knew of the situation in the South; there was no guarantee that any of Winterfell’s spies had survived the slaughter in the city. At the same time he had to protect the Northmen who were just outside the gates, while ensuring that Daenerys would actually send the message. He stood up and paced the room, with each back and forth crafting and rejecting a new message. He laughed bitterly to himself as he realized the irony of the predicament he was in - he needed Sansa’s help to craft a message to Sansa. For the year he’d spent in Sansa’s company, he’d grown used to having her write out the messages that needed to be sent, and he’d come to rely on her easy way with words and insights into the political realm that Jon had trouble navigating. She seemed to instinctively know which lords and ladies had to be commanded or threatened, if one required enticement, and when simple reminders of duty would be sufficient. One time he’d mentioned as much to her; she’d grown still at the compliment before whispering that she’d had many lessons on the importance of words.

Jon balled his hands into fists thinking of Cersei Lannister and all the lessons she’d imparted on the young, innocent Sansa who’d left Winterfell with her head full of dreams. At least there was one death in this city that did not weigh on his conscience. Thinking of a young Sansa reminded him of another message and he pulled it out of the pocket in his tunic. Reading it now, he couldn’t help but think back on the day he’d received it.
“Sansa?” he asked after he’d politely excused the two of them from a conversation with Yohn Royce about supplies that were being sent from the Vale and would be arriving in Winterfell within the next few days. He saw her shoulders tensing as she turned to face him, but he needed to get his question out before they had any other conversations. “Where is Littlefinger?” He’d been worrying about the fact that he hadn’t seen the man at all during his first day back in Winterfell. It wasn’t like Petyr Baelish to drift far from Sansa’s side - where he seemed to feel it was his right to linger, whispering secrets and poisonous words in her ears.

Sansa looked surprised, clearly expecting that they would have other conversations prior to this one. “He’s dead,” she responded flatly. Motioning for him to follow her, she led him to the empty hall where they’d met with the lords earlier. Then she shut the door behind it and stood bracing herself against it for a moment before turning toward him and declaring, “Arya and I killed him.”

It had been a long time since Jon had felt such relief at hearing of anyone’s death. “What happened?” he asked her quietly. Clearly the Knights of the Vale had not felt any desire to leave Winterfell after his demise and Jon briefly wondered if Lord Baelish’ death had been made to look like an accident.

She looked troubled for a moment and then pulled a small piece of paper out of her pocket.

He read it, not quite comprehending the words and then read them again and understood exactly when this raven had been sent to Winterfell.

Robb, I write to you today with heavy heart. Our good king Robert is dead, killed from wounds he took in a boar hunt. Father has been charged with treason. He conspired with Robert’s brothers against my beloved Joffrey and tried to steal his throne. The Lannisters are treating me well and providing me with every comfort. I beg you: come to King’s Landing, swear fealty to King Joffrey and prevent any strife between the great houses of Lannister and Stark.

Your faithful sister, Sansa

Looking up, he saw that she was still staring down at the message in his hands. “Long ago, a very foolish little girl wrote that,” she said quietly. She glanced up at him and continued, “Littlefinger was present when Cersei forced me to write that message to Robb so it didn’t take him long to find it and try to use it to turn Arya and I against one another.

Jon clenched his hand into a fist and watched as Sansa reached down and took that fist in her hand. “What happened?” he asked softly.

“Don’t worry,” she breathed as she eased his fingers open and placed her own hand inside his. “I knew how to beat him and I made sure we played his game long enough to gain the trust of the Knights of the Vale before holding his trial. I couldn’t let you lose all those men before we faced our war against the army of the dead.”

Jon felt shame welling up in his throat. He’d promised Sansa - promised her - that he would protect her and he’d been thousands of miles away when she’d had to face down this enemy. What if Littlefinger had figured out their scheme and he’d killed them for their daring? If only he’d been able to persuade Daenerys to come North more quickly, perhaps Littlefinger’s blood would be on his hands instead of his sisters’. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here,” he managed to choke out.

Sansa’s mouth twisted with wry amusement as she asked, “Do you think I’m still that foolish little girl who’s ready to fall for one of Littlefinger’s schemes?”

Anyone witnessing their conversation would have sworn Sansa was joking, but Jon could see the coldness in her eyes. A coldness which seemed to ask him scornfully, Do you know how many
times I’ve been underestimated? Do you dare to underestimate me now?

“No, of course not! But your safety is more important to me than any army,” he told her fiercely, watching mouth fall open as she drew in a sharp breath at his honesty.

Before either of them could say another word, the door opened and Missandei walked in. “Queen Daenerys requests your presence in her chambers,” she announced.

Jon had practically bit his cheek as his jaw clenched upon hearing her words. She’d forced him to stay away from his family for months now - holding him captive on Dragonstone and then dragging him with her to King’s Landing for her parley with Cersei Lannister - despite all his requests to go home. Now that he was finally back in Winterfell and reunited with his lost siblings, she felt it was her right to consume his time whenever she wished for company. He glanced at Sansa and saw a fierce anger in her gaze that slid off her features like water and had completely vanished by the time she turned and smiled at Daenerys’ friend.

“Of course,” he told Missandei. He turned back to Sansa before he slipped out of the room. “I’ll come visit you when I return,” he promised to her in a whisper.

At the time he’d been planning to tell Sansa everything that evening - he’d been planning to rest in her presence and listen to her council - to allow her to share his triumphs and his worries. Then Daenerys had threatened his sister and all desire to share his secrets with anyone - particularly Sansa - had vanished. Sansa had already endangered herself with Littlefinger. The vow he held most sacred was his promise to protect her - to protect their family. He refused to allow any of them to be punished if Dany figured out exactly how much he’d deceived her. The Dragon Queen was not a merciful ruler; she would not spare the lives of anyone she found complicit in his crimes.

So Jon had not shared his secrets with Sansa, even when she’d asked if he loved Daenerys. But that night when he’d been sitting alone in his bedchambers as his mind spun from the dizzying emotions and implications of his identity, his hand slid into his tunic and he’d found that Sansa’s message was still there. He knew she probably wanted it destroyed, along with any evidence that she’d once been easily manipulated, but Jon had clung to this piece of paper through the journey across all of Westeros and would sometimes pull it out to remind himself why he was crossing the continent to fight in a war that he did not care about. He needed to protect his family; he’d do anything to protect his family.

He took out a quill and wrote a message as close to the original as he could, carefully changing important details that he knew she would not fail to notice. And as much as he wanted to mirror it in its entirety, he could not make himself write the word ‘beloved’ next to Daenerys’ name. After watching her burn down the city, he would be hard pressed to stand in the same room without screaming at her, let alone pretend to enjoy her company once again. Finally he was as satisfied with the message as he possibly could be and took it to the Unsullied guard outside his room. After burning Sansa’s original message, he finally allowed himself to rest as he had not been able to in months. He had done all he could and now he had to have faith in Sansa that she would figure out what he was trying to tell her.

_Sansa, I write to you today with heavy heart. The good dragon Rhaegal is dead, killed with wounds he took from a scorpion bolt. We have taken King’s Landing, but Varys has been charged with treason. He conspired against Daenerys and tried to share the secret we swore not to reveal. The Queen is treating me well and providing me and the Northmen outside the city with every comfort. I beg you: come to King’s Landing, swear fealty to Queen Daenerys and prevent any strife between the great houses of Targaryen and Stark._
Chapter End Notes

In case anyone is wondering about the use of titles in this chapter, it was intentional. People keep referring to Jon as "Your Grace" out of respect for his decisions despite the fact that he is no longer King in the North. Also, I'm sorry this chapter has taken so long to post, darlings! I found it extremely difficult to get into Jon's headspace immediately after the Battle of King's Landing because he's so grief-stricken that it hurts my heart (seriously, my brain kept moving on to writing future scenes/chapters instead of focusing on this one). And of course when I finally got into writing this chapter, it also took a really long time because I had to keep looking up the quotes I wanted to use in my attempt to convey just how hard of a time Jon is having as he second-guesses and overanalyzes every decision he's made in the past year. Most quotes are from the show and/or books, but the "what have we become?" that Jon thinks to himself is what Miguel Sapochnik stated was his motto for 8x05. I wanted to include that line because I think it perfectly captures Jon's state of mind during the battle.

On another note, thank you again for all your lovely comments! I love you all so much! <3 Feel free to leave any comments here or to send any comments or questions to me via my Tumblr. (I’ve also been making edits for each chapter, which you can find here.)
Sansa

The sound of screaming jolted Sansa from sleep and it took a moment for her to realize that the screams were not her own. It was such a rare occurrence for something other than her own nightmares to wake her, that it took a moment to recognize that it was Bran’s cries that she was hearing. Instantly, she was running out of her room and down the hallway towards his own as she pulled her cloak over her shoulders. The screams had quieted by the time Sansa reached his door, and she pushed it open to find Bran sobbing into his pillow. Sansa’s heart broke at the sound and she rushed over to his bed and pulled him into her arms, stroking his hair as she let him cry himself out. Sansa knew, even without asking, that his nightmare had been of the horror that he’d witnessed in King’s Landing three days ago. He’d woken up screaming from nightmares each night since and there were dark circles under his eyes that gave evidence to the hours he’d spent staring up at the ceiling trying to block out the images afterwards. He had forced himself to watch Jon’s confrontation with Daenerys the day after the massacre so that they could make sure their cousin was not sentenced to death, but Sansa had not had the heart to ask him to look towards the south since then for fear that what he saw would only bring him more heartbreak.

Every time she thought of the senseless act of cruelty that had happened in King’s Landing, she just grew more and more enraged. It was such a juxtaposition to feel so much anger in her home now that she was with family here again; especially since she’d hardly ever felt that emotion here throughout her childhood. Arya had always been the angry child, convinced that the world and, more specifically, Sansa were out to get her. By the time Sansa had seen her again though, it seemed as though most of that anger had been burned out of her. Not so with Sansa. Too many years of pushing down anger and cutting remarks while she’d been mistreated in captivity had left emotions bubbling underneath the surface of her skin, ready to spill out and consume any who dared to threaten or endanger her people or family. The thought of all the innocent lives that had been lost to the Dragon Queen’s ruthless play for power was horrifying and Sansa hated that she had not been able to protect any of her siblings from the experience - not even Bran, who had been thousands of miles away. Her arms trembled in rage as she thought of how much the Dragon Queen’s wrath had hurt the people she loved the most, but she fought to control it for Bran’s sake. His heart was already full with grief and she did not want her anger become his focus so she made sure to keep that rage boiling under her skin.

As Bran’s breathing slowed, Sansa thought back to all the nights he’d fallen asleep in her arms when he was a little boy who loved stories. Her stories had been his favorites when he was small and he had often crawled into her bed to beg for one when he couldn’t sleep. Her lips twitched at the thought and she wondered what her brother would say if she wove a tale for him now. Once there was a brave young man who could see everything, she thought as she gazed down at him. That alone would have torn apart a lesser man, but this one was strong and brave and he endured for years after being torn away from his family. Even after he made it back to them, his sister still couldn’t keep him safe no matter how hard she tried. For the sight could still harm him, even when their enemies could not. She pressed her lips together. Perhaps she should save her stories for a time
when they were not both so heartsick.

Bran shifted in her arms and Sansa realized he wasn’t drifting towards sleep when she saw his eyelashes flutter open. “How are you feeling?” she whispered.

The answer was so long in coming that Sansa had started to think he wouldn’t give her one, before he finally said, “I don’t miss the coldness of being only the Three-Eyed Raven, but I do miss not feeling anything when I had to look at the terrible things that were happening in the world. Right now, I wish… I wish I wasn’t feeling at all.”

“Me too,” Sansa responded softly. “But feeling doesn’t make you weak, Bran. Don’t let our enemies rob you of the feelings that makes you a caring and kind person.”

Bran nodded and wrapped an arm around her. They sat in silence together for a few moments, which was only broken when the door was nudged open by a long snout as Ghost wandered into the room and jumped up on the bed to join them. He settled between them and laid his head on Bran’s chest.

Sansa had not expected to see Ghost for at least a few more days since he had gone out to hunt only yesterday and game was scarce in the north now that winter was upon them. He must have known we needed him, she thought as she reached down a head to pet the top of his head and glanced over at Bran.

“Hello Ghost,” he said with a slight smile as he began scratching under the direwolf’s chin. “Did you enjoy that rabbit we caught?”

“What?” Sansa asked, startled by the statement.

Bran met her eyes, almost defiantly, and said, “I’ve been having wolf dreams again. Yesterday I woke up tasting blood in my mouth, blood from the kill that I made in Ghost’s skin.”

“Is that possible?” Sansa asked after a moment of stunned silence. “I thought you said that only happened, or in my case would have happened, because of our connections with our own wolves? How are you able to connect that way with Ghost?”

Bran glanced down at the direwolf on his lap and suddenly Sansa was afraid of what his next words would be. “Jon is still alive, isn’t he?” she demanded as an icy dread crept into her heart.

“Don’t worry, he’s alive,” Bran responded immediately, reaching over to give Sansa’s hand a light reassuring squeeze before he moved his hand back down to continue petting Ghost’s head. “I think….” he took a pause to consider his next words before continuing, “I think I might be able to because I’m the Three-Eyed Raven. I’m stronger at warging than any of the rest of you and I’d been practicing for my attempt to thwart the Night King’s attack for so long that I must have grown strong enough to connect with Ghost even though he’s Jon’s direwolf.” Ghost raised his head at those words and Bran smiled as he gazed into the direwolf’s eyes.

Sansa nodded and filed that information away to consider more carefully later as she walked over to his door and gently closed it before returning to her seat on the bed. “Bran,” she said carefully, pulling his focus back to her, “We need to discuss what we’re going to do next.” As much as she hated to have this discussion so soon after his nightmare, there had been a flurry of messages the day before and Sansa knew that many of the lords and ladies would finally have received the news of the Targaryen they had crowned king. They would inevitably demand an audience with the Lady of Winterfell today and she wanted to talk to Bran about everything first. She refused to allow him to be blindsided by her decisions the way she so often felt with Jon.
“Daenerys has summoned us to court, hasn’t she?” Bran asked, meeting her gaze more steadily than she’d imagined he would.

Sansa shook her head slightly as she pulled Jon’s message from the pocket of her coat where she’d placed it last night after reading it half a dozen times. “Just me,” she told her brother as she handed it to him, scanning over the message again as he read it.

Sansa, I write to you today with heavy heart. The good dragon Rhaegal is dead, killed with wounds he took from a scorpion bolt. We have taken King’s Landing, but Varys has been charged with treason. He conspired against Daenerys and tried to share the secret we swore not to reveal. The Queen is treating me well and providing me and the Northmen outside the city with every comfort. I beg you: come to King’s Landing, swear fealty to Queen Daenerys and prevent any strife between the great houses of Targaryen and Stark.

Your faithful brother, Jon

“This looks exactly like-” Bran started.

“Yes,” Sansa said as she stared down at it, lost in memories as the past and present overlapped. She saw the warnings and the threats Jon’s message contained – in a way she had not when she’d written a similar letter so many years ago. Cersei taken complete advantage of her naiveté when the queen had forced Sansa to unwittingly write her own ransom note. She was also aware of the two warnings that Jon had indicated merely by crafting his letter after hers. He was an unwilling hostage who could be harmed if his family stepped out of line. Even more urgently, he seemed to be trying to remind her what had happened to their family when Robb had responded to her letter all those years ago. Shortly after Jon had been crowned king, Sansa had half-advised, half-demanded that Jon not repeat the same mistakes that had gotten most of their family killed. Now he was silently repeating those words back to her. The future of House Stark, perhaps even the future of the North depended on her actions.

She had put aside her own fears and suspicions about Jon’s motives upon receiving his message last night. It spoke enough about his feeling and situation now for her to understand that if Jon had loved Daenerys before, he could not any longer. Jon had played the game of thrones and knelt to save the North; now he was a hostage that she had to find a way to save. She would wait until they were together again to voice her doubts and demand answers. At present, she needed to focus on her people. They had lost two kings in the last few years but they had not lost House Stark and she refused to fail them now.

Bran reached over and gave her a quick hug, pulling her out of her memories of her time as a captive and fears about Jon’s captivity now. “I’m coming with you,” he murmured into her shoulder.

“No!” Sansa exclaimed in horror as she tore herself out of his arms and gripped his shoulders. “Bran, you need to stay in the North! You’ll be the ruling Stark in my absence!”

Shaking his head stubbornly, Bran said fiercely, “I have been the Stark in Winterfell before and I refuse to be left behind again. I choose now to fight for my family. You’re not a sacrificial lamb, Sansa. I’m not letting you go down there alone to be held captive or worse. It’s my turn to protect you.”

Tears streamed down her face at his words. She was so touched that he wanted to protect her, but she was also horrified at the thought that yet another sibling would be in danger. “Bran,” she choked out, “Please don’t do this. I need you to stay safe. I can’t lose another sibling.” Images of her dead brothers swam before her eyes. Greywind’s head howled in pain from where it was sewn onto
Robb’s body. The arrow in Rickon’s chest accused her of indifference as his sightless eyes screamed that she had not tried hard enough to save him. Theon’s cold, pale skin swam before her eyes in sharp contrast to the man she’d seen whole and healthy mere hours before. She had not been able to save any of them, but she could not let Bran share any of their fates.

She glanced up at Bran and saw that he was crying along with her. Perhaps the same images were haunting him as well. “Neither can I,” he whispered as he wrapped his arms around her again.

“Bran, please—”

“No, Sansa. You will need me to keep an eye on Daenerys so that we can anticipate her next moves before we act. How can we save Jon and Arya otherwise?”

She wanted to scream at him for using their family as leverage to put his own life in danger. There was no way to deny him now, for his argument held too much merit. They both knew how much danger their siblings were in.

Bran pulled back a little and gazed at her with such a fierce expression that it reminded her for a heartbreaking moment of Robb. “The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives,” he said. Sansa could only hope it was a promise.

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“He’s a Targaryen! The Targaryens have proven that they can’t be trusted,” Lady Barbrey Ryswell Dustin insisted as the lords and ladies around her nodded in agreement.

Sansa stared the woman down from her seat next to Bran in the front of the room, “My cousin is the son of my aunt, Lady Lyanna Stark, and was raised by my father, Lord Eddard Stark.” She raised an eyebrow as she went on, “Perhaps you mean to say that the Starks cannot be trusted as well?”

“Not the Starks, my lady,” interjected Lady Eddara Tallhart. “But he did bend the knee to his aunt. Perhaps he values his Targaryen bloodline more than his family in the North.”

Pushing down a sigh, Sansa responded, ”My lords and ladies, I received a message from my cousin last night which leads me to believe otherwise. In it, he warned that Daenerys Targaryen was holding many of our men, himself included, as her captives in King’s Landing. He also informed me that she is demanding I come south to bend the knee.”

Amidst the shouts of “Bitch Queen!” and “Targaryen filth!” that echoed around her after this announcement, Sansa did not allow herself to unleash any of the rage that boiled beneath her skin, refusing to let any of her emotions to cross her face. Eventually Sansa’s icy demeanor chilled the room into something close to silence.

“Jon sent home as many of them as he could, but about half of our forces remain as her hostages,” Bran said before she could call the room back to order. Earlier, Bran had forced himself to see what was happening in King’s Landing. Sansa had protested, but had only been able to do so half-heartedly. No ravens save the one from Jon had reached her in the last few days and she feared that all of her spies, or perhaps most of the ravens, in King’s Landing were dead.

“That does not change the fact that he bowed to a Targaryen,” Lord Lyessa Flint interjected.
“The north remembers,” another voice said, although Sansa could not make out who had spoken the words.

“Aye,” several voices agreed wholeheartedly.

“No, it does not change the fact that Jon gave up his crown,” Sansa responded. “I am not urging anyone to forget what my cousin has done, but rather to remember everything he did during these past few years. He told us himself when he came back with the Dragon Queen that he chose the North over his crown. He brought armies and dragons to fight the dead with us. And unlike the Targaryen Queen to the south, the Night King would not have stopped until every single one of us was dead.”

“Well, regardless of his intentions, Jon Snow, or Targaryen if you prefer, is no longer here and he no longer rules us,” protested Lord Harwood Stout. “The North is its own kingdom and should not subject itself to the rule of a queen who clearly inherited the Targaryen madness. The last trueborn son of Ned Stark sits before us and we need a new king.”

Sansa’s heart skipped a beat at the words as several fists pounded on the tables. This would be madness and yet there would be nothing she could do to stop it if Bran accepted.

“No,” Bran said quietly in the seat next to her. Sansa closed her eyes in relief but they flew open again upon as she heard another voice join the fray.

“Or a Queen,” shouted Wylla above the din. “Lady Sansa has led us capably this past year and would continue to do so well if we crowned her instead.”

“Aye,” said several voices as people around the room began rising to their feet.

“Stop!” Sansa commanded, rising to her feet as well and indicating with her hands for the entire room to be seated. “My lords and ladies, you are very kind. But this madness must not continue. My brother and I refuse to allow you to crown either one of us today. The Targaryen Queen might not be a ruler we accept but we cannot openly oppose her yet. To do so would be tantamount to war and she just burned down King’s Landing with her dragon to show the world how powerful that makes her.”

Wynafryd had been a silent observer throughout this whole meeting, but now she called out to Sansa, “So how do you mean to respond to the queen?”

Sansa couldn’t help the small twitch of her lips at the question; most others would not have picked up on her command that they not openly oppose the dragon queen yet, but Wynafryd never missed such things. “I will not subject my people to the fire and blood the Dragon Queen will inevitably bring to our doorstep if I do not answer her request, nor will I leave my cousin and the Northmen in King’s Landing at her mercy to suffer for my insolence,” she told them. “Therefore, my lords, my ladies, only one choice remains. My brother and I will ride south.”

Chaos reigned as every lord and lady began to protest but both she and Bran remained resolute. There was nothing anyone in this room could say that would change either their minds. We both have too much of the wolf blood, she thought to herself as she glanced over at the stubborn look on Bran’s face that must have matched her own.

“But there must always be a Stark in Winterfell,” she heard Lady Jonelle Cerwyn protest loudly.

At those words, Sansa held up her hands for silence and put an end to the ruckus. “There will be no one in Winterfell. It shall be abandoned before we leave.” Northern lords and ladies had made an art
of shouting out their displeasure and the deafening silence that followed Sansa’s announcement spoke louder of their disapproval than any words could have in that moment. “After what happened in King’s Landing, I fear that the Targaryen Queen might want to take out her frustrations with me on the North. I will not risk the lives of everyone who still remains here so Winterfell must be emptied before we arrive in the capital.”

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The meeting with her lords and ladies had drained the last bit of energy from Sansa and after she and Bran had finally finished speaking to the last of them, they had taken refuge in her solar with Brienne guarding the door to turn away any unwelcome visitors. They sat now sipping wine together and Sansa enjoyed the silence that reigned as heavily as winter. She wasn’t sure how long they had been sitting there watching the fire crackle and the light slowly fade as evening fell, but she jumped when she suddenly heard a clatter just outside the door. Walking over and opening the door, she was surprised to find Sam on his hands and knees breathing heavily as he tried to pull his books and papers into an orderly pile.

Brienne was glaring down at Sam as she said to Sansa, “My lady, if you’re not feeling up to it, I can tell him to wait until you’re ready to talk.”

“No, Brienne, it’s all right,” she said as she smiled up at her overprotective guard and tried not to laugh at the way she was speaking about Sam as if he were a troublesome child. Brienne knew how exhausted she had been earlier and Sansa wondered if she’d somehow caused Sam to spill his books in an attempt to turn him away.

Brienne bowed her head slightly and knelt down to help Sam retrieve his books, carrying a few into the room.

“Sansa,” Sam greeted as she helped him gather up the last of the remaining parchments and held open the door for him. “Oh and hello Bran,” he said around the stack of books in his arm that almost blocked his vision as he maneuvered them over to the desk.

As he set them down, he grinned excitedly and said, “I think I found something!”

At those words, it felt as though all the weariness left her bones and she motioned for still-glaring Brienne to shut the door behind her and hurried to push Bran’s wheelchair over to the desk where Sam was sorting through his pile.

“What is it, Sam? What did you find?” she asked him, barely daring to breath. She had hardly dared to hope that there might be a way to save the North as well as Jon’s life and her own.

“I finished reading through all the passages about dragons in the books from Winterfell’s library - you would not believe how dull some of the books on dragons are - when I realized that one of the books I stole from the Citadel was about the Dance of the Dragons. I knew it probably wouldn’t contain any relevant information, but so many dragons died during those few years that I thought it might at least be worth reading before I told you I hadn’t found anything. And then I was reading this passage about the riots in King’s Landing-” He stopped his ramble and looked at both of them for a moment before asking, “How much do you know about the history of the Dance of the Dragons?”
Bran gazed up at Sam and almost smirked as he said dryly, “Probably more than anyone.”

Part of Sansa wished Sam had just continued to barrel on in his sweet bumbling way, but she admitted, “I remember the important details and large battles, but it has been such a long time since I studied Targaryen history that I might have forgotten some of the relevant facts.”

“Right, okay! So towards the end of Queen Rhaenyra’s brief rule of King’s Landing, the city was unstable because the people feared an attack from her enemies’ dragons and after Queen Helaena death - which was rumored at the time to be murder, although Archmaester Gyldayn argues it probably wasn’t - riots broke out around the city. A prophet called the Shepherd incited the smallfolk into rioting by preaching that they were all doomed as long as dragons remained in the city and he lead a mob to their death when they stormed the Dragonpit where the dragons had been chained up. Thousands died in this attempt - but so did all five of the dragons in the city.” He paused briefly to take a breath and looked up at her to see if she was following. At her nod, he continued, “One dragon died when she collapsed the ceiling in her attempt to flee, and we know little about the blows that killed two of the others. But one was killed by a spear that was jabbed into repeatedly into his throat and eye as he burned alive the man who killed it.”

Sansa shuddered at the horrifying images of the burning, endless burning, that had plagued her mind this past year and forced herself to breathe and focus on the story as she gripped Bran’s hand tightly in her own while Sam kept talking. “The last dragon to fall was killed by the blows of an axe on the back of her head that finally split through the scales and bones to kill her when the axe pierced her brain. Now eyes are one of the only vulnerable parts of a dragon’s body so the story of that death makes sense, but maesters have long argued about the other since the scales of a dragon are almost impenetrable-”

“But,” Sansa interjected, “The scorpions managed to injure Drogon and kill Rhaegal a few weeks ago?”

Bran looked up with a frown from the illustration he had been studying in one of Sam’s books that was lying open on the table. “And I saw Drogon injured in Meeren from several spears thrown by Daenerys’ enemies. How could they do that if the dragon scales are impenetrable?”

Sam gifted them both with a smile and she could tell he was as excited by their questions as he was that they were paying such close attention to his insights. “Spears make it easier to wound dragons because the sharp points can lodge between their scales, but as long as a man just hits the body of the dragon, it they will not land a killing blow because they won’t be able to hit it deep enough to truly injure it. The scorpions though…those hurtle out spikes with enough speed to penetrate scales and hit the organs beneath. They were designed to kill dragons, but all of them are gone.”

Sansa pondered his words for a moment, “So if it takes a machine of that force to kill it, how could a man do it with just an axe in hand?”

“That is truly the question, Lady Sansa,” Sam said excitedly. “Most argue that the dragon must have been young enough that her scales had not fully developed, but here Maester Jarack argues that there must have been something special about the blade that allowed it to pierce through a dragon’s armor. His theory is that the axe was like the one owned by House Celtigar and must have been made from Valyrian steel.”

“Oh,” Sansa breathed out. “But that would mean-” She turned to Bran to ask him if that was something he could find out and saw that his eyes were already white. She bit her lip and tapped her fingers on the table as she did a mental inventory of the Valyrian steel available to her. Thanks to Jon’s obsession with Valyrian steel before Sam had told him about the dragon glass on Dragonstone, Sansa knew almost all of the Valyrian steel blades that were in Westeros as well as which ones she
could call upon to fight for House Stark. Unfortunately, the only two that still remained in Winterfell were Oathkeeper and Heartsbane. All of the others were far out of her reach though. The dagger that had been used to defeat the Night King must have been taken by Arya down to King’s Landing or Sansa would have found it when she’d swept through Arya’s rooms to remove anything that might be important to her sister in an effort to ensure nothing was stolen while Arya was gone. Jon had carried Longclaw into battle, although Bran had told her he’d been relieved of his weapons when he was taken into custody so she knew that it was no longer in his possession. When Ser Lyn Corbray had headed down to King’s Landing to fight with Jon, he had taken Lady Forlorn with him. She almost sighed as she thought of the other that had been in her home mere weeks before; Widow’s Wail was a disgrace to the proud blade that her father had once wielded, but it belonged to House Stark. If Sansa had known Jaime Lannister was planning to leave, she would have demanded that the sword remain behind in Winterfell. It should be here, she thought now as she glanced over at Bran. It belongs to my father’s last living son. She almost smirked at the thought of how much more terrifying Bran would look wielding that blade, even in his chair, than Joffrey had ever appeared when holding it.

“Maester Jarack was right,” Bran said as he came back to them looking pale. “That axe was made of Valyrian steel.”

Sansa nodded at him, wishing he hadn’t needed to see dragons so soon after the horrifying sights he’d witnessed in King’s Landing. She decided to try to take his mind off of the battles of the past by focusing on the battle ahead. “Sam, you said they were chained up?” At his nod, she continued, “Which means we would need a way to trap Drogon before any Valyrian steel blades could be used to strike him?”

“Yes,” Sam said, looking down at his book intently as if he might be able to find the solutions to all their problems if he just stared at it long enough. “Maybe we could build some scorpions? We only have to hit the dragon once and then a Valyrian steel blade could finish the rest.”

“Perhaps if we had more time-” Sansa admitted, stopping as she saw Bran begin to shake his head. “Cersei had dozens built for the walls and ships guarding King’s Landing and not one managed to hit Drogon before he destroyed them,” Bran told them distractedly. Sansa glanced over and could practically see a plan forming in his mind so she stayed quiet to allow him time to think. “Perhaps,” he said softly, “I could be the trap.”

Sansa did not understand for a moment what he meant and then the conversation they’d had that morning came into sharp focus. “But Bran, isn’t it dangerous?” She demanded. “You said that warging didn’t work on the Night King and a dead dragon! How do you know it would work on a living queen and a live dragon?”

Bran was already shaking his head at her as he said, “The Night King was a powerful warg and he’d had centuries to practice. Daenerys has an entirely different bond with her dragons. If she is a warg, she’s a very weak one, which leaves her dragons vulnerable.”

Sam was nodding thoughtfully as he absorbed the idea. “Gilly told me once that the Free Folk say only one mind can warg into an animal at a time,” he agreed. “If Daenerys can’t warg or is a weak warg, then you might be able to do it.”

Nodding, Bran said grimly, “We will find out.”

“No!” Sansa cried. Accompanying her south was dangerous enough, but her heart raced at the thought of Bran facing down a dragon. “Please Bran, I need you to stay safe. There must be another way.”
“Sansa,” Bran said gently. “No one will never be safe as long as there is a dragon in the world. You know that. I might not have the use of my legs anymore, but I’m not broken. I can be brave.”

Gripping his hand, Sansa said fiercely, “I’ve never thought of you as broken and you are one of the bravest men I know, but I can’t sit by and watch as you throw away your life on a gamble that you might be able to warg into a dragon.”

“I won’t, Sansa,” Bran vowed as he looked up at her. “I plan to spend our entire journey south preparing for this. If I’m not ready or if we think of another way, then I won’t even attempt it. But I think I am strong enough to do this.”

Sansa knew Bran would keep that promise and so she nodded her head, vowing to herself that she would do her best to find a less dangerous way to defeat the dragon. Right now though, she could see in Bran’s pleading eyes that he needed her to believe in him. “I know you are, little brother,” she told him.

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Sansa’s head was pounding as she laid down her quill and put her head in her hands. She’d spent the last two evenings drafting letters long into the night, calling in debts as well as making promises and threats where needed. This war might be won with blades, but it was only through politics that peace could ever be achieved afterwards and she needed to be prepared for that eventuality. She smiled bitterly to herself thinking, Unless I am dead, but in that case it will not matter to me anymore. Sansa had sent riders to the Vale that very morning and her missives to the Free Folk, the crannogmen, and her uncle in the Riverlands contained warnings of the threat she knew was coming and pleas for any aid they could send. She needed brave men at her side if they were to battle a dragon and face the armies of the Dragon Queen. To other potential allies she was less transparent, but instead let them know the truth of Jon’s claim to the Iron Throne and asked any she could trust to ready themselves for a journey to hold a Great Council as the realm had not held since the days of King Maekor’s death almost a century prior.

Her only letter that contained anything personal was the one she had composed to Yara Greyjoy. She was planning to have the Manderly sisters send it from White Harbor with some of the ashes she had gathered from the pyres where Theon had been laid to rest. No one had dared to oppose Sansa when she’d insisted on having the remainder of his ashes interred in the crypts of Winterfell out of respect for his actions in defending the Starks. Hopefully Yara would approve, but Sansa would insist upon it even if she did not. He was my brother in spirit if not in blood, she thought fiercely, and Yara can hang if she doesn't want any part of him to remain here.

There was one letter Sansa had been putting off for days as she thought over every single one of her actions and how they might affect her family and her people, but she could avoid it no longer. Pulling out another sheet of paper, she drafted a response to Jon’s message, trying to buy herself as much time as possible without endangering any lives. Eventually she was satisfied that the message would appear innocuous enough to anyone who did not know her well.

Jon, As glad as I was to hear that you and the Queen have claimed this victory over Cersei Lannister, I was greatly saddened by the unhappy tidings that your message contained. We shall mourn for the loss of Rhaegal together when I see you. As for your invitation, I am a servant to the crown and can but do as my ruler commands. The snows have been falling too fiercely for me to send a raven before now, but please rest
assured that I will be on my way south for the coronation as soon as the snows have been cleared enough to allow for travel. I know it is not as cold in the King’s Landing as it is here, but I still worry about you. Please wear enough layers to stay safe and warm throughout the coming winter storms.

Yours faithfully, Sansa Stark

The Lady of Winterfell

Sansa hoped that Jon would have a chance to read the message and know that she was coming to fight for him. No one had been able to send her messages when she’d been held captive in King’s Landing so many years ago, but she wanted to lend him as much hope as she dared. He would not be held captive for long if she could do anything to save him. Hopefully, Daenerys would think herself the ruler to whom Sansa had declared loyalty; perhaps the Dragon Queen would be less spiteful in her actions toward the Northmen she held captive if she thought that she had brought the proud Sansa Stark to her knees.

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“Why have you come, Lord Glover?” Sansa demanded as she watched him walk into the room and glance around nervously. When she’d discovered he was on his way to Winterfell, she’d had almost all the tables in the Great Hall cleared out, all except one. She sat at that table facing him now, with Bran at her left hand. Brienne and Podrick flanked their table by the fire, but no one else had been allowed to attend this meeting; even the guards who’d escorted Lord Glover into the room had been ordered to wait outside the door. While she hadn’t had time to share her plans with Bran, he’d taken in their surrounding and given her an amused smirk before Lord Glover had entered. Her own lips had instantly smiled back at him as they shared their own private amusement over the intimidating image this would present. The room hadn’t been emptied of all its tables like this since Petyr Baelish’s trial almost a year ago. She had carefully dressed in the outfit she’d worn the day of that trial and had told the servant she sent to fetch Bran to make sure he wore the fur cloak she had made him to this meeting. Clothing and symbols had often been some of Sansa’s most powerful weapons and she hoped he saw all the strength of their family in the way that Sansa looked every bit his liege lady and Bran his liege lord. She wanted to remind him the Starks claimed their vengeance against those who had wronged them. From the expression on his face and the sweat that was starting to accumulate on his brow, she knew her tactic had worked.

Lord Glover stood in front of her dressed in his leathers and armor, his only adornment a band tied to his arm that displayed the sigil of his house, an armored fist in a scarlet field. Had his wife tied this favor around him before he went to face his liege? Sansa had never seen the tall man look so small and afraid, but perhaps she’d never before seen the real Lord Glover. He was never supposed to be the Lord of Deepwood Motte, just as she was never supposed to be the Lady of Winterfell. The world might have been a kinder place if their elder brothers had lived. He had fought for his family, but he had not fought for the Starks since Robb’s death despite the promises that he’d made and subsequently broken. Words were wind, as Sansa had learned long ago to her sorrow. At least the first time he had failed House Stark, he’d had the honor to tell them directly to their faces. The second betrayal, a message carried by raven to lords he thought might never be able to exact vengeance, declared indignation and reeked of cowardice.

“I have come to apologize, Lady Stark,” Lord Glover told her.
“Your apologies are pretty things,” she told him. “And yet, I recall you apologizing the last time you failed to uphold your vows to House Stark. Then you broke your promises yet again. I have not remembered incorrectly, have I, my lord?”

“No, my lady,” he answered, clenching his hands into fists tightly at his side. “But I-”

“You swore your allegiance to Jon, declared him king, and then abandoned us when the army of the dead arrived.”

“Yes, my lady,” he said.

“Please explain why I should not have you thrown out of Winterfell or demand your head as an oathbreaker,” she said, finally giving him a chance to speak.

“My lady, I will be frank with you, when you first told us that Jon Snow had bent the knee to a Targaryen and given up Northern Independence to her, I have rarely felt so betrayed. The man I had hailed the King in the North had lost it, just as your brother Robb did years ago,” he said. Sansa stiffened at the mention of Robb and did her best not to let any emotion show on her face. “I looked at my wife and children who had spent such a long time imprisoned by the ironborn and found that after yet another betrayal by your family, I could not leave my home to fight for yours.”

Lord Glover cleared his throat before continuing, “Then the dead came and I saw the threat for what it truly was. I know that many more of them came to Winterfell, where I should have been with all my men, but there were plenty to fight in Deepwood Motte. We lost so many men that they almost overran us until suddenly they shattered - at the hands of your sister’s blade, I hear.”

Bran inclined his head at Lord Glover, who seemed to take that as his encouragement to continue. “Your family fought bravely for the North and I should have been at Winterfell to fight by your sides when you did so, despite the fact that your bastard brother, or should I say cousin, seems to have followed in your brother’s footsteps and lost his crown to a foreign whore-”

“That is enough, my lord!” Sansa interrupted fiercely, losing her patience at last. She had spent a year leading the northerners and that experience had granted her a finer education on how to rule the north than any of her former teachers had ever managed. Of course, she drew on their lessons - leading by example when she could, but being stern, innocent, gracious, and loving in turns when necessary to help encourage her people to defend and protect their lands. She only showed them the steel in her veins on rare occasions and Lord Glover had only heard it in her voice twice before. She hoped he was remembering both those occasions as she spoke. “You seem well-informed about the battle that was fought at Winterfell. Perhaps in his missives Lord Hornwood failed to explain exactly what happened in King’s Landing.”

“No, my lady,” he said. “Larence told me that that Targaryen girl burned the city-”

“She did,” Sansa continued, interrupting him once again. “She burned King’s Landing after her enemies had been defeated, after the city tried to surrender. Tell me truly, my lord, why do you think she would do that?”

She looked straight into his eyes as she asked that question, but only saw horror reflected there. When he did not respond, she answered her own question. “The people did not embrace her as queen and so she killed them. What do you think would have happened to the North if Jon had not bent the knee?”

His mouth was hanging open but no words escaped. Perhaps she should have said this to him months ago or perhaps she should never have said it at all and kept her suspicions about Jon’s
motives a little closer to her heart to only be admitted to those she trusted. But Sansa was tired, so
tired, of everyone making assumptions about Jon. She felt incapable of holding back her angry
words as she barreled on, “Does it not strike you as convenient that she burned King’s Landing right
after the realm discovered that someone else has a stronger claim to the Iron Throne? As though
perhaps she means to remind everyone just what kind of damage she will do to anyone who does not
embrace her reign or dares to oppose it. You keep comparing Jon to my brother Robb, but did it
never occur to you that perhaps he is more like Torrhen Stark, the king who knelt to dragons to save
his people from a fiery death? Would you have preferred to see our lands and people burned by that
foreign whore because the Starks refused to bend?”

She took a deep breath and then let it out, glancing down and seeing the touch of Bran’s hand on her
arm more than she felt it. She looked up again at Lord Glover’s face and saw that he looked stricken.
“Lady Stark, if this is true,” he said urgently, “Then I have wronged you and your family more than I
knew.”

“Yes,” Bran said simply as he finally interjected his voice into the conversation. “You have.” His
words held a finality to them that indicated his own judgement of the man and she saw the hope
bleed out of Lord Glover’s eyes.

Sansa felt all the fight go out of her at those words. She forced herself to continue addressing Lord
Glover even as she longed to be out of this room and began to regret her decision to arrange it in this
manner. It was almost as if she could still feel the bitterness of passing a death sentence, still see a
body on the floor, and still smell the blood as it seeped out onto the stones. Petyr Baelish had never
deserved her mercy; perhaps Lord Glover did not either. She could order his execution in this room
as she had Littlefinger’s or she could have him dragged to the courtyard to face his sentence in front
of all the northmen and women assembled to display just what she thought of his betrayal. And yet,
she had never before ordered the execution of someone who had not murdered a member of her
family. Lord Glover’s betrayal paled in comparison to that - failing to fight for the Starks was not the
same as fighting against them.

Perhaps it would be wise to deal with Lord Glover harshly and remind people that there were
consequences for breaking oaths, but there had been too much death dealt out by the Night King and
the Dragon Queen and Sansa could not bring herself to order any more at this moment. Mercy had
always been the Starks’ greatest strength and she had learned a valuable lesson by watching Jon
inspire people to love him by granting it to them. No matter how the voices of all her former teachers
and and betrayers whispered that it would only show weakness, she decided to extend that mercy
now. “We still hold most of your grain stores, Lord Glover,” she said tiredly. “I know that is why
you are here and I will see that provisions are sent home with you to Deepwood Motte so that your
people will not starve.”

“My lady, I cannot return home,” he insisted. “I’ve heard whispers that you mean to ride south and
face the Targaryen queen. Allow me to make amends and prove my loyalty to you. Allow my men
and I to accompany you on this journey.”

“My lord,” she told him coldly. “You have not asked me whether I mean to fight Queen Daenerys or
kneel to her as my cousin did.”

“No, Lady Stark,” he replied. “I have not yet earned back your trust, but you have long deserved
mine. Whatever you mean to do, House Glover will back you. We will not abandon you again.”

Part of her wanted to turn down his offer and yet she could hear Littlefinger’s voice in her head
whispering, “Everyone is your enemy, everyone is your friend.” She did not yet know which Lord
Glover would turn out to be, but it might be wise to have him close when she found out. His fighting
men would be needed in the upcoming battles, even if their lord proved false. “If you mean that, my lord, I want your oath of fealty - not to a position, but to my family.”

Pulling his sword out of its scabbard, he knelt before her. He had done that to Jon not two years ago and he had broken faith with them. Once she’d believed Northern promises meant more than the faithless vows of southern knights, but not anymore. Only time would tell if these oaths would be kept. “I pledge myself and all of House Glover to you and your kin, Lady Sansa,” Lord Glover said with determination. “We will serve as the faithful bannermen of House Stark and will answer whenever you call on us to fight and die for the North, now and always.”

She nodded at him and he silently put his sword back in his scabbard. “You have failed us twice, Lord Glover. You shall not fail us again or you will bring the wrath of House Stark down upon your head. The north remembers.”

Glancing over at Bran, she saw him turn the cold smile of the Three-Eyed Raven on Lord Glover as he echoed the sentiment with a threat of his own, “The wolves remember longer.”

Chapter End Notes

So a few tidbits about this chapter: The history of the storming of the dragonpit comes from *Fire and Blood*, but there is no indication in the books that the axe that brought down Shrykos was made of Valyrian steel. (If anyone hasn’t read *Fire and Blood*, I highly recommend it as it’s absolutely fascinating.) I’m also not certain if Bran could feasibly warg into Ghost since he has such a strong connection with Jon, but I wanted to show how strong Bran’s powers already are by the fact that he is able to do so.

Essentially both these things happened for plot purposes. Anyone paying close attention may have noticed my little "fuck you" to the GOT writers for giving Bran the title "the broken" at the end of the show, but I wanted to have someone who loves him vehemently oppose that idea in this chapter because he is NOT broken nor has he ever been.

Also, thank you to everyone still reading this story! I know I can be terribly slow about posting sometimes, but real life has been kind of hard and I lost my inspiration to write for a few weeks. It’s slowly come back again though and I hope you enjoy this chapter and everything I have planned for the future.

As always, my sincerest gratitude to anyone who leaves a comment. You guys seriously give me so much motivation and I love you all so much! <3 Feel free to visit my Tumblr or check out the edits I've been making for each chapter which you can find here.
Arya

The fire was everywhere. It was inside the walls, over her head, cutting short the screams all around her, and consuming everything in its wake. Arya ran as fast as she could, but the chaos seemed to find her no matter where she turned. All around people screamed and burned. Those that did not burn were cut down by blades or buried under collapsing buildings. The dragon flew overhead and Arya panicked. She - like this monster - was an instrument of death and she had no power to save the people around her. That didn’t stop her from trying, but it was no use. One by one, the god of death tore them from her grasp with his mocking laugh.

Wheels were creaking nearby and somehow Arya knew if she could reach them, she and the child in her grasp would be safe. The smoke was so think that she couldn’t see anything in front of her and suddenly Arya realized with horror that she could no longer feel the child’s hand in her own. Screaming, she ran back the way she had come, waving her arms in front of her in a desperate attempt to find the girl. Then she felt the hand in her own and started to run again.

She came to and found that the hand was still in hers. Perhaps she had managed to save the child from the carnage of the city after all. If only she could find the strength to open her eyes and check if the creaking wheels she could still hear were taking them away from the fire and destruction. “Where...am...I...?” she managed to croak out through parched lips. The hand tightened in her own. “We’re taking you somewhere safe,” it told her.

Home. It was the only safe place left in the world. She settled back and allowed herself to rest for she knew the creaking wheels must be carrying her home.

Arya remembered when she had first arrived back in Winterfell after being gone for years that felt like decades. She had looked around the courtyard and seen ghosts of her long-dead brothers laughing and playing. She wondered that everyone around her did not seem haunted by the shadow of the past that lingered in every corner. I do not belong here, she had thought to herself at the time. She’d seen too much, spent to long in the arms of hatred and death to dwell among such happy ghosts. Turning on her heel, she had headed down to the crypts where death dwelt instead. It had caused another ache in her chest to see her father’s statue among all the ones she’d grown up seeing here. You should have lived, she thought as she stared up at the face that did not match the one in her fondest memories. You deserved to live.

She’d not been expecting Sansa to come and find her, to pull Arya straight into her arms with a glad smile. Had Sansa’s life truly been so terrible, she’d wondered at the time, that she would be so quick to embrace the sister she’d once hated? It was not a fair thought and Arya learned even more how unfair she had been to her sister soon after. Sansa was as much a lady as ever, only now there was a hardness in her eyes and steel in her spine. She’d protected them all fiercely - guarding the Starks and the North as faithfully as their parents had done.

One morning, after particularly haunting dreams, Arya had told her sister about a few of the people she’d killed and some of the training she’d endured since leaving Winterfell. She didn’t understand
how much she’d been dreading Sansa’s judgement or fear until she looked at her sister and saw only compassion shining out of her eyes. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that,” Sansa said simply as she gave her sister a quick hug. “But I’m glad it was others that died instead of you.” After that, she’d treated Arya’s abilities as a fact of life: the sky was blue, Winter was coming, and Arya was a Faceless Man. More importantly though, she’d trusted Arya implicitly, inviting her to council meetings, listening to her advice, and letting Arya have enough space to keep some of her secrets to herself. Given time, Arya knew they would be closer than she’d ever been to any of her siblings. It was hard to teach herself how to open up again after so many years on the run, but it was a struggle they shared.

Two night after they’d executed Petyr Baelish, Arya had found her sister staring off the battlements and Sansa had told her in a detached voice some of what she’d endured in her time as Ramsay’s wife and prisoner before pointing out where she’d jumped from the battlements with Theon to escape. It had taken all of Arya’s strength to let her sister tell those stories. She’d endured many hardships but hearing about those of her siblings was by far the worst. She was glad that Sansa had been given the opportunity to avenge herself, but how Arya wished that Needle could have filled him with holes until he begged for a quick death - a mercy that he did not deserve and she would not have granted.

“You killed him though,” she reminded her sister gently. Reminding herself of the deaths of her own enemies was sometimes the only thing that had helped her move forward. “He’s gone and you lived.”

“I did,” Sansa responded with a small smile. “Sometimes if I think of what the Boltons did to Robb and Mother, how Ramsey killed Rickon, or the things he did to me-“ she trailed off for a moment before continuing on- “that’s the sweetest thing I can remember.

“I’m glad you got revenge for us,” Arya said. She took a deep breath, a feeling of dread settling in her stomach as she thought about sharing this secret with Sansa. Her sister had accepted the deaths that Arya had told her about already, but what would she think after hearing the gruesome way in which Arya had murdered the Freys. “Although I would have enjoyed killing the Boltons as much as I did the Freys.”

“What?” Sansa asked, looking at her sister sharply.

Arya looked out into the courtyard rather than meet her sister’s gaze, “First I killed Black Walder and Lothar Frey, then I baked them into pies and fed them to Walder Frey. I slit his throat when I told him what I had done. Afterwards I took his face and killed every Frey man that participated in the Red Wedding. I couldn’t save Robb and Mother, but the Freys didn’t deserve to live after what they’d done.” Arya blinked away tears as she visions floated before her eyes of Greywind’s head on her brother’s body and Nymeria pulling her mother’s mangled corpse from the river.

Sansa’s reached out a hand and placed it on Arya’s shoulder. “I heard they were dead,” she said softly. “I’m glad it was you.”

Looking up, Arya saw none of the judgment she had feared. The only thing that shone from her sister’s eyes as she looked at her sister was a fierce pride. “Really?” Arya asked with a slight laugh. “I thought maybe you’d be a proper lady and tell me that vengeance is in the hands of the gods.”

Sansa shook her head. “I stopped believing in gods the day Joffrey took Father’s head.” She looked up toward the sky as she said, “They had years to exact vengeance on our enemies for their betrayals and chose to do nothing. It’s our turn for vengeance now.”

Death had many faces and Arya had spent years learning to see him in any form that he took. She recognized one of those faces now in the cold smile that formed on Sansa’s lips as she continued, “I
can think of no more fitting end for our enemies than to have a taste of their own betrayals. It feels like justice that House Frey was killed in such a shameful way after their treachery.” Sansa turned back toward Arya and said softly, “Thank you for telling me.”

Arya nodded at her sister and turned to head back to her rooms when Sansa’s voice stopped her, “I am trying, you know.”

Turning around, Arya waited silently for her sister to continue.

Now it was Sansa’s turn to stare down at the courtyard and Arya wondered if she saw the same ghosts of their past or if hers took the form of Ramsey Bolton when she looked around Winterfell. “I’ve spent so many years hiding every emotion so none of them could be used against me. You were trained to wear faces, but I was trained to wear masks. It can be difficult to remove them sometimes. Since you’ve assumed so many identities, I think you might understand my instinct to hide better than anyone. But I hope you know I am trying.”

She surprised Arya then by pulling her into a fierce hug. “We weren’t close growing up, but I don’t want that to define us going forward. I will always be your friend as well as your sister.”

Arya hadn’t known what to say at the time so she’d just nodded and hugged her sister in return. Now she wished she’d found the right words to say to Sansa. There was a chance that even her brilliant sister would not outlive the queen of fire and blood who thought nothing of discarding the lives of the people she claimed.

The next thing Arya was aware of was her body being lifted from the wagon. “It isn’t safe,” one voice hissed to the other. It was a kind voice, the one that had spoken to Arya of home. “We should keep moving.”

“We’ve been going for almost a week just taking turns dozing in the back of the wagon,” another voice insisted. “We’d know by now if anyone was chasing us. If things ever come to a fight, we’ll be better off if we’re rested enough to be able to lift our swords.”

She could hear the frown in the first voice as he grumbled his discontent, but he set her down gently in warm furs and she drifted off to sleep hearing him chatting with the other man as they built a campfire.

A few hours later, the crackling of that fire morphed into dragonflames that threatened to consume them all. She wept for the people in King’s Landing that she hadn’t been able to save. She wept with the knowledge that she might never see her siblings again. She wept over her mistake in attempting to assassinate the Lannister Queen when she should have killed the Dragon Queen before the flames could consume them all.

Suddenly she was being pulled into a warm chest as the kind voice hushed her sobs. “It’s alright,” he said. “You’re safe.” His hand found hers and Arya relaxed at the feeling.

She must have drifted off to sleep because the next thing she felt was the warmth of the sun against her skin. Arya slowly managed to open her eyes and had to blink through the sensations of falling and dizziness that struck her as soon as she did. How long had she been unconscious that her body was so resistant to the simple act of opening her eyes? She glanced over to her left and her breath caught in her throat when she saw Gendry sleeping next to her. Her head was pillowed on his arm and he still had her hand clutched in his own. He looked peaceful; he felt safe.

As if he sensed the change in her breathing, Gendry’s eyes slowly fluttered open. He glanced down at her, clearly expecting her to still be asleep if the surprise on his face was any indication.
“You’re awake,” he said breathlessly, as if he was afraid to startle her back into unconsciousness.

“How-” Arya started to ask him, but her throat was far too dry for her to get anything else out. Gendry carefully extracted his arm out from where it had been wrapped around her and ran to get her a drink of water. She sipped at it slowly, trying to swallow around the pain in her throat until she was finally able to rasp, “How long was I out?”

“A week,” Gendry responded, his tone indicating he thought this was an eternity.

“What happened?” She asked him around the lump in her throat. Each sip of water seemed to be helping to clear her throat and Arya fought to keep talking despite hating the weakness she could hear in her voice at each word. Learning what had happened was far more important than her pride. Gendry eyed her as she asked it, clearly not wanting to overwhelm her with the truth. Arya sighed and swallowed another gulp of water before whispering, “After the city burned.”

“Your brother pulled the troops out of the city,” he told her. “Davos said he sent home many of the men before he asked us to take you back safely.” He looked straight into her eyes as he asked with concern, “Arya, what happened to you?”

“And Jon?” Arya asked, ignoring his question. She was almost afraid to hear the truth but she had to know.

He looked down at his hands as he responded softly, “He went to face the queen.”

Arya’s mouth tightened as she looked up at him. “We have to go back.”

Startled, he glanced up at her. “Arya, we can’t go back! You’re injured and it’s not safe.”

Grimacing, Arya glared up at him. “I’ll have healed by them time we reach King’s Landing. I have to go rescue my brother.” She smirked at him as she continued, “And my life hasn’t been safe since I was eleven years old; it’s not going to start now.”

“Arya,” he said with a clear warning in his tone that she instantly decided to ignore. “You don’t understand. The maester said your head was hurt really badly. He told us you shouldn’t even walk for several days after you regained consciousness.”

Arya raised a brow at him in defiance and pushed herself to her feet. The pain and dizziness took her breath away and she instantly began to fall, only for Gendry to catch her. She cried out at the pressure against her arm and he quickly shifted so that he was no longer touching that spot before settling her gently on the blankets again. Arya took inventory of her injuries as she gasped for air. There was a deep cut that was bandaged on her right arm and she realized that she must have incurred that wound as she fled the city. There were bruises all up and down her body that she felt throbbing from the pain her movement had cost her. But worst of all was the injury to her head. Arya had fought through physical pain and severe injury in the past, but she would not be able to fight if she could not even keep steady on her feet while the world spun around her. As her vision cleared, she saw Gendry’s face hovering over her with concern and Ser Davos standing a few feet behind them.

“Are you alright, my lady?” Ser Davos asked gruffly.

“Yes,” Arya lied as she swallowed down the pain. She did not protest the title that he gave to her, hoping it would get her what she wanted. “Ser Davos, please take me back to King’s Landing.”

He shuffled his feet awkwardly for a moment before looking her straight in the eyes as he said, “I
can’t do that, my lady. Your brother asked me to see you safely home and that’s where I intend to
take you.”

Arya wanted to scream at both of them for denying her request out of hand. “But Gendry said Jon
gone to meet with Daenerys before you left. He’s in danger.”

“He is in danger,” Ser Davos agreed, clearly deciding that mincing words would not do any good
with Arya. “But if you’ll forgive me for saying so, we can’t do anything to help him.”

Not trusting her body to be able to handle shaking her head at him, Arya pursed her lips. “We can
help. We can rescue him.”

Ser Davos shook his head at her. “My lady, I have no doubt that were you in full health, you would
be able to do so. But you’re badly injured, I am no warrior, and Gendry is about as good at sneaking
as I would be with his hammer. We can’t do it. And even if we could, what do you think would
happen if we managed to get your brother out of King’s Landing?” Images of dragonfire pursuing
them filled Arya’s gaze and she dimly heard Ser Davos continue, “Even if she didn’t come after us,
what would stop her from flying to Winterfell and burning it down?” She squeezed her eyes shut
against the image of her home burning and tried to block out the sounds of Sansa and Bran
screaming that she could almost hear.

“We can’t just leave him there,” Arya whispered. Gendry reached out and wiped away a tear that
had fallen down her cheek before fixing Ser Davos with a fierce glare at the harshness of his words.

The old knight steadfastly ignored Gendry’s anger as he kept his gaze fixed on Arya. “We must.” He
looked away for a moment as though debating whether or not to confess a secret or not, but then
turned back to her and said, “He was her prisoner for almost a year and he managed to stay alive. I
believe he’ll be able to do so again. And if you’ll forgive me for saying so my lady, he might already
be dead and going back there would just bring you the same fate.”

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It had been three days since she’d first woken up and Arya had yet to be able to fall asleep without
touching Gendry. Nightmares filled with terror and the horrifying images loomed over her like
predators ready to dig in their claws at the first sign of weakness. Her inability to defend herself had
filled her with a dread which bled into her subconscious and made her unable to fight or flee the
dragons coming for her. Even when blind, Arya had not felt so betrayed by her own body. She kept
her dagger on hand at all times, ready to strike anything that came close to her, but she knew it would
be little use against the monster she truly feared.

For the past several nights she’d lain awake staring up at the stars until she heard Gendry’s breathing
even out. Then she would roll over and lay a hand on his chest. The contact - a tactile reminder that
someone who loved her and wanted to protect her was there - made Arya feel safer than she had
since she’d left Winterfell months ago.

Tonight though, tonight his hand was laying outside of his bedroll. While laying a hand on his chest
was nice, it had not soothed her the way holding his hand had while she’d been drifting in and out of
consciousness.

Arya waited until the she heard Davos drift off and saw Gendry’s chest steadily rising and falling.
Then she slowly reached out her cold fingers and placed her hand in his, smiling as his fingers instinctively curled around hers. It appeared that even in sleep he wanted to protect her.

“Are we ever going to talk about this?” Gendry asked, breaking the stillness of the night without opening his eyes.

Arya snatched her hand away as though it had been burnt.

Gendry sighed and rolled over to face her.

“Talk about what?” she asked to break the silence that followed. She could feel him staring at her, but she had not yet mustered up the courage to force herself to meet his gaze.

“Arya, you won’t answer any of my questions about how you’re healing. I keep waking up to find you wrapped in my arms, but you barely speak to me during the day. You haven’t met my eyes since we told you that we wouldn’t take you back to King’s Landing,” Gendry accused. “You won’t even look at me right now.”

Arya met his gaze defiantly. “There. Is that what you wanted?”

“Yes… No… Arya.” Her name was an accusation on his tongue but there is a fondness behind it that made her uncomfortable. She’d pushed him away, but he was still risking his life to keep her safe. The only other people who’d ever done that were her family. But Gendry wasn’t family. She’d offered once long ago and he’d offered the night before she left Winterfell. But the refusals that hung between them made every interaction an uncomfortable reminder of what could have been.

When he made his offer to spend the rest of his life with her Arya had not known how to begin to process all of her feelings. Instead she had gently turned him down. Perhaps a life far removed from her own, which had been so filled with hardship and death, would spare Gendry the same fate. He would be safer the further he was from her side, she had reasoned as she pushed him away.

Arya had been afraid of his offer, afraid of life so far away from her siblings after so recently getting them back. It was terrifying to think that something might happen to them while she was gone that could not take place were she in Winterfell protecting them. It was just as terrifying to think that Gendry might be stolen away from her as so much else had been. The universe - which seemed intent on taking away anything that brought Arya a semblance of happiness - had brought Gendry back. She didn’t understand why he had appeared in her life again and so she had decided to protect her heart and merely sleep with him without letting herself get attached. *It’s easier this way*, her head reassured. *You’re a coward*, her heart mocked. *He’ll be gone soon*, experience warned.

And yet, here he was. Again.

She dropped her gaze to his hand again and watched as he slowly laid open his palm for her to take if she wished. “Look, I know I made things awkward between us,” Gendry said quietly. “You don’t love me the way I love you. But I was your friend for so long and I don’t want anything to come between us. I still care about you, Arya. Can we be friends again?”

Arya didn’t know how to respond to the first part of his speech. Now was not the time to contradict him and say that she did love him. She needed to sort out her own feelings before she could let his become involved again. Instead she reached out her hand and grasped his, smiling back at him as his whole face lit up. “I care about you, too,” she said softly.

She paused as she struggled to find words to explain her actions. “King’s Landing was worse than Harrenhal.” Gendry stiffened beside her at that description but silently waited for her to continue. “It
was...hell. I’ve spent my whole life surrounded by death and nothing I’ve seen prepared me for the horrors I saw that day.” She swallowed the lump in her throat at the thought of the mother and child she hadn’t been able to save. “It helps me to sleep when I know someone is here,” she whispered. *It helps me to sleep when I know you’re here,* she thought.

She looked up and saw that his face had softened. “I’m here,” Gendry promised as though he had heard her thoughts. He brought her hand to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to it. “I’m not going anywhere.”

As if he knew that she’d given him all the revelations she could for one night, he turned onto his back again and closed his eyes. Arya curled up in her own blankets and enjoyed the feeling of her hand in his. She relaxed into his touch, taking comfort in the knowledge that they would defend each other from any danger. Even more than that she appreciated knowing that he would be here when she woke up, whether from nightmares or the rising of the sun. She’d always felt safe with Gendry as a girl and that hadn’t changed in all these years. Even her dreams felt closer to safety that night than they had since she was a girl for when she closed her eyes that night, she dreamed of wolves.

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“Here’s your dinner, m’lady. I cooked you the finest meal that that the road has to offer,” Gendry teased as he bowed with a flourish to hand her a bowl of the stew that he had prepared.

Arya raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him. “We’re lucky there is food in that cart or we would have all starved by now. When I can hunt again, I’ll show you the finest meal that the road has to offer.”

“You can’t hunt on your own,” Gendry said in a scandalized voice. “A high-born lady like you should have people catering to your every whim.”

He meant it as a joke, but it reminded Arya all over again how much she wanted to be back on her own two feet. She’d been going stir-crazy the past few days, but even sitting up on her own required so much energy that there hadn’t been a chance of her walking on her own yet. Arya scowled at him as she replied scathingly, “I’ve been taking care of myself for half my life so I don’t need servants. And if you were really planning to carry out my every whim, you’d have taken me back to King’s Landing by now.”

Ser Davos sighed from where he was sitting moodily by the fire. He usually sat as far away from the flames as he could, but tonight Arya had watched in astonishment as he’d seated himself only a foot in front of their campfire. Gendry rolled his eyes at Arya and went to fetch some more firewood.

She had yet to address Ser Davos directly since he’d told her they should leave Jon in King’s Landing, but she’d apparently worn down even his patience with all the digs she’d made to Gendry throughout the day about knights who refused to help a lady in need. Gendry had been trying to make peace between them, but thus far Arya had refused to allow it. No more though, she decided. Her tactics so far had not yielded the results that she wanted so it was time for a different tactic. Perhaps she might trick the truth out of him if they played the game of faces.

“Ser Davos,” she said, turning an intense gaze on him so suddenly that he started and dropped the waterskin he’d been holding. “Why do you serve Jon Snow?”
Davos gazed down at his hands and thought for a long moment before he spoke.

“At first,” he said. “I only wanted revenge for Stannis Baratheon and his daughter, the Princess Shireen.” He scrubbed his hand over his face before motioning toward the path where Gendry had gone. “She was his cousin and the kindest soul I’ve ever known. I promised myself I would protect her. I stayed with Stannis long after his belief in the Red Woman made me want to leave his service. But then Shireen was—” he paused for a moment as he visibly shrugged to find the words to continue—“dead. My own son was dead.”

Arya could hear the truth in every word.

“They both died because of me,” he said in a heavy voice.

A lie, Arya knew. But he wasn’t lying intentionally. The guilt he felt was his own truth.

Davos glanced back up at her as he said, “And I didn’t have anywhere safe to bring Gendry even if I had gone to find him in King’s Landing. So I chose revenge because I wanted to make sure their deaths weren’t for nothing. But somewhere along the way I started to believe in Jon. Maybe if I serve him long enough, I’ll make up for all the wrongs I allowed to be committed while I was serving Stannis.”

“Why did you let those wrongs be committed?” Arya asked quietly after she’d reflected on his words. She’d never before played the game of faces with someone so determined to be honest with her and it was making her overanalyze everything he told her to make sure he wasn’t omitting truths rather lying.

“Because I believed in Stannis,” Davos responded. “I was loyal to Stannis to the point of madness. The one time I truly defied him was to save Gendry. Perhaps if I had defied him more, or taken Shireen with me despite her father’s orders, she might still be alive.”

Perhaps this would be her in. Arya raised a brow at him, “And you think it’s good to obey Jon with the same type of blind obedience?”

Davos chuckled quietly in response to her question. “Jon doesn’t demand blind obedience. Jon is—” he mulled over his words for a moment as he stroked his beard—“different. He’s never cared about power or his right to rule, and does everything he can to protect his people and his family. He listens to my counsel and never commands me to do something I believe is wrong. That’s what makes him a good king - the kind of man I want to serve, that I’m proud to serve.” He shot her a tired smile, “He didn’t command me to get you home but I promised I would get you there safely when he requested it of me. I intend to keep that promise if it kills me.” He eyed Needle at her side, “Which you certainly could, my lady.”

Arya closed her eyes and breathed out. He’d told her the truth in everything. It certainly explained why he refused to help her if it went against Jon’s orders. She supposed the time had come to forgive him for refusing to follow her wishes. She certainly wasn’t going to begrudge Jon that his men were loyal to him. Perhaps Ser Davos was right after all. While she didn’t intend to go all the way to Winterfell without Jon, if she made it to Moat Cailin, she could write to Sansa and get her advice on their next move. Her sister was brilliant and if anyone could come up with a plan that would allow them to help Jon without turning Daenerys against the entire North, it was Sansa.

She opened her eyes to look back up at Davos and grinned as she heard Gendry stepping back into their campsite. “I could. But it’s probably unladylike to kill a man who rescued your friend.”

Davos sputtered and Arya enjoyed the look of indignation on his face before he burst out laughing.
She turned and saw a smile on Gendry’s lips as he realized a truce was being called.

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She ran as fast as her legs could carry her. The deer was quick, but the scent of fear ahead drove her into a frenzy and she was quicker. Through the woods they ran, her companions at her heels and the terrified deer just managing to keep out of reach. It had been a long time since she’d found any game this big to hunt, but it would keep her pack warm and fed tonight. With that thought, she put on an extra burst of speed and lunged. The deer tried to leap out of the way, but it could not escape her. She tightened her jaws around its throat and lunged. The deer’s scream cutting off almost before it began. Her pack fell in beside her and began to feast upon the carcass as she licked the blood from her lips and howled joyfully into the wind.

Arya woke tasting blood on her lips, almost startled to find herself in a woman’s body after spending the past hour hunting in a wolf’s. She slipped out of her bedroll, carefully extracting her hand from Gendry’s so as not to wake him and wandered into the woods to find a clearing not far from their camp.

Arya swung Needle through the air, fighting imaginary attackers as she glided through her steps. Swift as a deer, she thought as she slashed the head off of one opponent. Calm as still water, she told herself as she ducked away from the attack of another. Fear cuts deeper than swords, she thought with amusement as she ended her dance with her sword right under Gendry’s chin. If he had thought he would be able to sneak into the clearing where she was practicing without her noticing, then he was sadly mistaken.

“Enjoying the show?” she asked, smirking at the gulp she saw him take as he stared down at her blade. He wasn’t feeling fear when he watched her, if the hazy look in his eyes was any indication.

Gendry cleared his throat, “Davos is ready to head out whenever you are.”

Arya nodded before resuming her dance. “I’ll be done in a minute,” she told him. She still had to rest in the wagon for most of the day since her body was still recovering, but as soon as she had regained her ability to walk, she had begun to train once again. A week ago she’d barely been able to make it through a few of the steps before she had to rest, but now she had regained enough of her strength she could almost make it through her whole dance. She refused to let any of the pain slow her down and only stopped when she grew lightheaded or dizzy. Head injuries, Arya had decided, were something that she would avoid at all costs in the future.

Slowly she slid through the last few of her steps, ending with a flip as she simultaneously slid her blade into its scabbard and strutted past where Gendry stood gaping at her. “Are you coming?” she called over her shoulder. The question appeared to help him to regain the function of his limbs as he hurried after her.

Arya wandered silently through the trees and sighed inwardly at the way Gendry stomped with every step. When she had mentioned that she would like to hunt when she felt well enough again, he had insisted that he would accompany her. If he truly intended to do so, she would have to teach him the art of moving silently through the woods or they would never catch anything.

“Where did you learn to fight like that?” Gendry asked as he caught up with her, pulling Arya from her thoughts.
“I started learning to fight with my water dancing master a few months before my father was killed,” Arya told him. “Then I spent two years in Braavos training with the Faceless Men before I found my way back to Winterfell.” She hadn’t mentioned the Hound, but she did not feel ready to speak of him yet. After years of wishing death would claim him, she was sad that it finally must have. Besides he had taught her much about killing and not a lot about fighting, so she did not feel like a liar omitting him from her answer. She glanced over at Gendry and saw a look of amazement crossing his face.

“You trained with the Faceless Men?” he asked breathlessly. “What was it like?”

“I learned how to fight using all of my senses,” she told him, choosing to omit the fact that she had learned this by being forced to fight blind, injured, and half-dead. “They taught me much about fighting and even more about death. I learned how to take faces and wear anyone’s identity. But I couldn’t become No One like they wanted, so I left.”

“What do you mean?” Gendry asked. “Why couldn’t you become No One?”

Arya paused to consider how to answer that question. Gendry had been so honest with her that she felt as though she owed him some honesty in return. Besides they had decided to be friends and she felt ready to start sharing some of her past with him. “When I got there, I thought I was the last Stark - the only one of my family left. Sansa could have been alive but I didn’t know how to find her. And if Jon was still living, he was tied to an Order that I could never be a part of. So when they wanted to make Arya Stark disappear, I thought it wouldn’t matter.” She fell silent thinking of all the methods they had used to try to rid her of herself - the blinding, the beatings, and the demand that she only kill for their order and the god of death.

“But it did,” Gendry said, pulling her back to the present. She glanced up and saw that his eyes were full of an emotion she couldn’t quite name.

“But it did,” Arya echoed, focusing on the path ahead. “I am a Stark and I could never erase that from myself.” She was first and foremost the blood of Winterfell. No matter what identity she had tried to assume, her own was carved so deeply into her soul that nothing could ever erase it.

“I’m glad,” he replied softly, reaching over to give her hand a quick squeeze before focusing on the path again.

She smiled up at him. “You should be,” she teased. “Who would have defeated the Night King if I wasn’t there?”

Gendry laughed. “You’re right as always, m’lady,” he said as they entered the clearing.

They walked over to where Ser Davos was adjusting the bridle of their horse. “Good morning, my lady,” he muttered as she walked over.

Arya stopped to look at him. He was usually so focused when he addressed her, but this morning he seemed very distracted. “What’s wrong?” she asked warily.

“It’s probably nothing, my lady. Only when I woke up, I went to that farm we passed yesterday to try to buy some food and they told me there was a pack of wolves roaming these woods,” Ser Davos responded, looking up at her with a tired smile. “As if we didn’t have enough to worry about.”

Arya nodded back at him and got into the wagon, her mind racing at the news. Perhaps it was merely an ordinary pack of wolves, but Arya didn’t believe it. Not with the woods that surrounded them looking far too much like the woods that had appeared in her dream. Not with a feeling in her gut as though a part of her soul was near at hand. Nymeria was close, Arya could sense it.
That night as they set up camp, Arya heard howling in the wind. Ser Davos picked up his sword and urged them both to do the same. But Arya would not let this become a confrontation. She darted into the woods in the direction the howls were coming from. Vaguely she heard the shouts and crashes of Ser Davos and Gendry running after her, but she couldn’t stop for them. She had been missing this piece of herself for far too long and she refused to let it go again.

The moonlight lit the path before her and Arya felt the strangest sense of rightness in her actions as though she knew exactly where it was leading. The wolves are calling, Arya thought with a smile as she ran toward the howling in the distance. They’re calling me home.

She stumbled into a clearing just as a direwolf leaped into it as well. They stared at each other for a long moment, the moonlight dancing around them like wisps of the past. Nymeria was even larger than when Arya had seen her last, but her eyes had not changed. They were the eyes that had followed Arya through the halls and woods of Winterfell throughout her happy childhood. They regarded Arya softly and she wondered how long Nymeria had been tracking her.

Their peaceful moment was cut short by the sounds of Gendry and Ser Davos crashing into the clearing behind her. Nymeria growled at them and seconds later, the snarls and howls of the wolf pack surrounded the clearing. Arya felt their ominous presence all around her, but she couldn’t take her eyes off of the beautiful direwolf she faced. They had both grown and changed, but Nymeria was part of her soul. She would no sooner hurt Arya than she would herself.

“Ayra!” Gendry shouted, his voice filled with fear.

“Come away from there, girl,” Ser Davos yelled at her.

Arya stretched out her hand to place it against Nymeria’s jaw, silencing the growls that her wolf was leveling towards the men who had broken into the privacy of their reunion. “I’ve missed you, Nymeria,” She murmured. “Will you come home with me this time?”

The direwolf leaned closer and Arya heard Gendry gasp behind her, but Nymeria merely licked Arya’s cheek before leaning down to nuzzle against her chest. All around the clearing the wolves stopped their growling and sat back on their haunches, clearly accepting that they would not be allowed to prey on these humans.

Arya turned back toward where Gendry and Ser Davos were gaping at her. “I’m not just a girl,” she called to them with a grin. “I am a wolf.”

Chapter End Notes

I figured it was time to check in with the only Stark we had yet to see conscious in this fic so I hope you enjoyed this chapter from Arya's POV. I couldn't resist having a dear friend join her and giving them a real opportunity to spend some time together. Also I know Arya said at one point that the only people that she’d pushed away who'd still risked their lives for her were her family, but that's something that the Hound has also done. But I wanted her to say that because I think she would be blocking out thoughts of him at that point since his death would be a painful thought for her (as I mention later in the chapter) and also I think there is a part of her that considers him family.
On another note, thank you again for all your lovely comments and all the encouragement to take my time in writing this! I've been injured and unable to write for the past few weeks and it means so much to me that you all have stuck with the story despite my unexpected hiatus. I love you all so much! <3 Feel free to leave any comments here or to send any comments or questions to me via my Tumblr and you can check out the moodboard for this chapter [here](#).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!