A Person Called Home

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Summary

The moment her eyes alighted on Jon's he broke from his restraint. Stampeded down the stairs and vaulted straight for her. Composure corrupted. Propriety be damned.

It was sweet, in fact, to see him again.

(AKA season 6 done my way)

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Notes

I wrote this two weeks ago and almost posted it last night, but talked myself out of it, but now...
Tumblr's talked me back into it. And I will warn you it's not as good as the reunion we got tonight because NOTHING will be as BEAUTIFUL and SOB-INDUCING as the reunion we got tonight. Obviously I'm not okay. Obviously I'm still a mess. But are ANY OF US okay right now? Are any of us?? Because, you guys, they're together. We've dreamed about this for years and now it's real and they're never leaving each other again.

See the end of the work for more notes.
hold onto me, 'cause I'm a little unsteady

Castle Black was far gloomier up close. As was the Wall, gargantuan on top of it, pyramids and pyramids of ice and snow and cold. While her brothers were astounded by the life on the Night’s Watch, they – and Arya at times, snuck out of bed or from lesson – hanging on every glorious word courtesy of Uncle Benjen, Sansa lacked the sight of its appeal. It was a hovel of a place in her mind.

How silly she felt, lifting her gaze to its rampart and the rangers lining it. Past Brienne’s right shoulder Sansa spied further down the wall, shrouds of black true to her song’s scripture, but none were her brother, not a prowling direwolf or shag of black curls among them. Her heart sank only slightly.

Her horse shifted its weight, lopping her to the side, and Sansa jerked her head down, tipped the hood Brienne bade her wear further down her forehead. Careful to hide her flames for hair, careful to hide her Tully cerulean eyes. Revealing her identity before she was in the safe arms of her kin wouldn’t help her, the knight had explained, Jon’s brothers more likely to shun her refuge than willingly open the doors to quarrel with the new lords of Winterfell.

Sansa hoped that wasn’t true, not now, so close to seeing Jon again. Jon who never joined their siblings’ teasing, who never called her silly for the pretty things in her head (when maybe he should’ve; they were right all along). Jon who felt like someone from a previous life, who was never supposed to be tangible again.

Jon who she had no idea what to say to. How to address.

What do you say to the first ray of light after years of clouds?

She kept her head down all the same, grasping the pommel.

A man stepped up between the crenels, smoking beard braided around stern lips. He peered down at the occlusion – and how peculiar they looked, Sansa almost chuckled. A woman-knight shining in her armor leading a party beneath her station, that of a squire clumsy on his sword and a cloaked figure curling in on herself. None of whom had any business being so far north.

“What can I do for you, milady?” the man shouted down, tucking black hands behind his back and shifting from ball to heel, ball to heel. He did so idly, already decided they were of little importance and easy enough to shoo back south.

Sansa felt Brienne’s full gaze turn on her. She tucked her chin tighter. “I seek an audience with your Lord Commander.”

“Is that so?”

In the dead air she heard boots clack and imagined the tranche huddling close, defensive, archers at the ready and clutches tight on their swords. Sansa ventured a peek and saw Brienne respond in kind, a hand touching her hilt. The horses pawed the snow.

“Does Lord Commander Snow know what this audience is in regards to?”

Lord Commander Snow. Was that what she called him now? The boy and her brother dead, a man and leader born, she supposed it was only right to match his title.

The wind shifted out of the north, roared over the Wall and charged on the sorry souls left outside.
Though a daughter of the north and its wolfish clan, the gust leaked through the cracks in Sansa's wool, plunging deep into her narrow where King's Landing briefly thawed her. She trembled.

Brienne shook as well, though for a different reason. A bristle, more like, her patience carried off on that wind. “He will,” she said, “once you allow us passage and fetch him for me.”

The man sighed. “I’m sorry, milady. I can’t let you past our gates without knowledge of your intentions. Trust runs thin behind these walls.”

It runs thin everywhere, Sansa thought, must’ve said it aloud because Podrick breathed her name, shifting his horse closer to hers. She liked him, Podrick, would’ve liked to know him in King’s Landing. Maybe he’d have softened everything about it, if only a little.

“We’ve been traveling nearly a sennight,” Brienne explained, “and are considerably worn.”

“As I said—”

“His business is with me.”

Sansa’s hands shook as she divested herself of the hood. The wind howled into her ears and for a moment she could’ve sworn they were true howls, from deep within the wood, within the snow. From Ghost and Nymeria and Shaggydog and Summer. Not a cry, not in mourning, but a fete. For all of the Wall to see, a Stark had returned to the north.

The rampart murmured her name, and she angled her chin to the whispers, to yes and it’s true. “Please, ser. I wish to see my brother.”

Holding her gaze, the gray man gave the order to retrieve Jon Snow and motioned for the doors to be opened. Sansa kneed her heels into the horse’s side and brushing past Brienne, finally closed the distance left between her and Jon. Closed the time since last she saw anyone of her family. She couldn’t help but more anxiously urge her horse on.

And yet her chest fluttered the nearer she drew to him. She passed through the slim margin at the sound of a bell and her heart swelled almost painfully, too big for her, pierced on her ribs and pushing into her belly. Oh God, oh Gods. When Jon greeted the party – if he greeted the party, as Lord Commander he had more pressing matters to attend to – what was she supposed to call him? ‘Lord Commander’ in public and just ‘Jon’ in private? Or ‘brother’?

But he wasn’t just Jon anymore. Sansa knew her Lady Mother would curdle in her grave hearing her daughter speak so informally.

‘Lord Brother’ perhaps? Or ‘my lord’? ‘Lord Snow’? Or—

“Jon.”

A whisper, caught there in her throat and thus not one he heard. Passed gratefully, relieved from her lips as she took in the sight of him waiting at the top of the stairs. His hands wrung the wood, holding steadfast though one foot edged to the stairs. They kept thinking each other a trick, Sansa realized, too good to be true, a mirage in the distance because severances were never given back.

Her braid crawled along her nape and Sansa took it between her fingers, ironing it in a useless attempt at taming the flyaway wisps. She was a lord’s proper urbane daughter, an envisioned queen; a girl long ago buried chastised herself for appearing before a man – any man – so bedraggled, so smudged and worn. But she parried the fuss, reminded herself that her outside was hardly the worst of it.
Brienne and Podrick haunting her back, Sansa’s horse slowed to a stop at the same time the doors clanged shut again. Sansa stared at the door (another door, another wall) and the men securing the lock in place.

They…weren’t rangers.

Glancing about the yard, she realized few of them were. They were wild-eyed and wild-haired, not in the black standard but belted and shoed in fur. The gray man, returned from the rampart, fit into the congregation advancing curiously closer, and he didn’t look a Black Knight of the Wall either. His hands weren’t blackened by the agony of fire as they appeared from a distance, but gloved in leather, wrist clasped in hand and stood at ease.

Another man slithered across the yard, his beard and hair as licked by fire as Sansa’s own, and her eyes followed him all the way to Jon’s side. The moment her eyes alighted on Jon’s he broke from his restraint. Stampeded down the stairs and vaulted straight for her. Composure corrupted. Propriety be damned.

It was, in fact, sweet to see him again.

The men sprung back, jumped away as he cut through them. One of them wrinkled his sharply pointed nose at them, bulbous forehead scrunching. “Back to your posts,” he barked.

Cowled, the audience shuffled off, feet sliding on the fresh snow as more began to fall. It drizzled down, floated onto Sansa’s shoulders and her horse’s mane, and her body shivered, but she didn’t feel the least bit cold. Felt nothing, thought of nothing but Jon as he came fast to her side. Faster. She heard her name fall out with every breath.

Then Podrick was there on one side, seizing her horse’s bridle, and Jon on the other, seizing her by the waist. His hands encouraged her to dismount, a desperate cling to them, like he held onto the apparition before she slipped from the saddle, slipped from his grasp. Her boots crunched in the snow and she dug them in firmly, rooted herself as to not so gracelessly fall into Jon’s arms (though nothing sounded better than the safe arms of her kin, her brother, her Jon).

She spun her fingers into the feathers spread across his shoulders, couldn’t push past the verklempt clogging her throat, the moment too big for words. Jon seemed incapable as well, again the shy boy she knew when, biting down too on the inside of his cheek. Instead he talked with his hands, begging are you okay, are you hurt, what’s happened to you, ran them up the long length of her sides, over the shallow hills of her shoulders, and down her arms.

He fingered her braid and it startled a laugh out of her. Out of Jon too.

It’d been so long since she last heard herself laugh, stopped wondering where the songbird went when screams burned her throat ragged. It was almost musical to her ears, and to Jon’s, a smile crinkling his eyes. He stroked Sansa’s hair, and wiped her face of the mud and ash and tear stains, and filled the whole in her chest, bloomed mirth where she thought it empty. The snow kissed his cheeks and his lips, flecked his hair, and Sansa playfully picked the flakes from the clipped curls, more chuckles bubbling to the surface and…

For a moment it felt like home again. Like chasing the direwolves through the godswood and Arya trying to fence with the sewing needles and Ned tucking them in with princesses and warriors to cushion their sleep. Like the time Sansa tried her hand at making lemon cakes until Jon and Robb snuck up behind her and poured a pot of lemon gratings over her head.

Sansa thanked the Old Gods they gave her a piece of home in a person.
The howling tempest slammed into Jon’s back. Lashed him, sweeping hair in his face that he rather pointlessly tried to curl behind his ear. The fishhook scar Sansa hadn’t notice before now sprung out at her. “What happened to your face?” she gasped, concern knotting her brow.

She cupped his cheek, tracing a finger along the fissure too close to his right eye, and Jon leaned into her touch. For a moment. He sucked a breath between his teeth. “Gods, you’re frozen.”

Hunching his shoulders to block as much of the gust as possible, he stripped off his heavy cloak and wrapped Sansa in it. Though they were near the same height, just a sway forward to touch foreheads, the drapery engulfed her, neck to ankles.

“You’ll be cold,” she protested, bunched a fistful in one hand and tried to catch Jon as he tugged the cloak tightly around her in the other.

“Don’t worry,” he assured. “I don’t much feel the cold anymore.”

“Why is that? And what happened to your face?”

“All stories for another time.”

“Promise?”

It sounded a superficial request, of stories and of trading them, but Sansa knew he understood its layer by the needled soft smile. Jon bowed his head and in whispering the words back, he did more than promise her stories; in doing so he promised they’d be together long enough for them to be told. Both his and hers.

Brienne stepped forward, her armor clinking and her horse’s hooves beating the ground. “Lord Commander,” she said, “there are things we need to discuss.”

“Aye.” Jon called forth a steward to take charge of the horses and then beckoned for Brienne and Podrick to follow. “Come with me. You must be hungry.”
take my heart and take my hand

Chapter Summary

Briefly Jon wondered if this was how it felt when he came back from the dead. This relieved, but at the same time cautious. This euphoric, but apprehensive.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was bewildering, having his sister returned to him.

After word of Joffrey Baratheon’s death – and Sansa’s subsequent disappearance – reached the Wall Jon assumed the worst. If Sansa wasn’t locked away in the Black Cells, key tossed and never to be seen again, then she certainly was dead. Like Robb. Like Bran and Rickon. Like Arya.

They never knew, then, how Jon’s oath to the Watch had been vow of protection replacing another. Mere days before King Robert and his convoy arrived in Winterfell territory Ned pulled his eldest sons aside and assigned them to watch over their younger siblings. Particularly Arya, who could be too independent for her own good. Specifically Sansa, more likely to dawdle too long in her daydreams than see the prince for who he unapologetically was.

Ennobled by his father’s trust, Jon pledged himself seriously. So failing, it was another leaden stone crippling him, one, two, three, four, five stacked atop a mountain of more.

As the four hied across the yard and progressed in to the tenements that old promise closed its fist around him again, tight enough to choke, tight enough to suffocate. His trust had distilled to a small few, since, and if anything, murder and resurrection made him more attentive. Enough so that he never stopped noticing the men he shared barracks with.

They tensed in abject fear, stood back and refused to look at him, but still he saw their eyes glaze greedily, felt them follow Sansa down the corridors. Even frost bit and wan, long and too lean, she was astonishing, his perfect lissome sister, a lady and queen to her core. His hand grazed off the small of her back and around her waist, steered her immediately to his solar as not to tempt the hunger that often followed starvation.

He ushered Sansa inside, her companions tight to her back, and closed the door again on her bright exclaim of Ghost’s name.

“Where did she come from?” Davos hissed on the click. “This is no place for a woman, least of all a highborn one like her.”

“I don’t see you so worried about that sorceress of yours,” Tormund argued.

Davos’ glower withered worst men. Hells, it paused better men. Tormund merely matched him, tilted his head in challenge. “That sorceress isn’t the daughter of a lord executed for treason. Nor is she implicated in the poisoning of a king.”

“She wasn’t involved in Joffrey Baratheon’s death,” Jon snarled, knuckles whitening on the door knob.
“But her husband was. Can you tell me you don’t find her vanishing to be highly suspect?”

No. Seven Hells, no, he couldn’t. He thought her locked away or dead, both by the swift hand of justice for playing a role in Joffrey’s demise. Her husband being arrested for the crime was guilty enough, but the king’s gruesome death occurring at a wedding, that was beautiful. Like revenge. Starks weren’t known to participate in such acts, but if ever Robb and Catelyn Stark’s murders were paid for, Jon thought there’d be poetry in carrying it out at a wedding.

Sansa, though. He loved her dearly, but she lacked such disturbance. He knew that down to his marrow.

“I can’t answer that,” he said, “but—”

“But have you looked at them?” Tormund interceded. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, crossed and uncrossed his arms. Flicked between the other two. “They wouldn’t be here if they had any other fucking choice.”

Jon nodded. “I know Sansa,” he told Davos. “I know she wouldn’t ever come this far north unless she had a good enough reason. If she’s escaping the Lannisters or something else as vile, I shoulder the full responsibility of sheltering her. I swear it.”

“You find out what you can,” Davos instructed after consideration. Jon bobbed his head in agreement, easing the door ajar. “Word travels and when it does, wherever she escaped from will come for her. So we know to know who it is she’s running from and how much danger she poses.”

She isn’t dangerous, Jon thought. Retorted, “Trust me, I don’t want her here any longer than she has to be.”

His quarters weren’t small by any definitions, the anteroom spacious enough for a Lord Commander and his duties, spacious enough for a direwolf. But it felt cramped. Congested not just with people, Jon realized, but the conversation that followed him in from the hall. It inhaled bigger and bigger, pressing him between a rock and a hard place. Between their truth and Sansa.

He knew they were trying to help, trying to figure the equation of three more in an already unstable environment, as intrigued and mystified by Sansa rematerializing as he was. But for him, it wasn’t mystification but relief that trumped intrigue. Briefly Jon wondered if this was how it felt when he came back from the dead. This relieved, but at the same time cautious. This euphoric, but apprehensive.

With little room to wiggle, he observed Sansa’s traveling companions. The woman, specifically, looked up and up and up, all the way to her blonde helmet. The squire needn’t adjust to more than a corner, but her shadow stretched well onto the ceiling.

Appareled like a knight and built like one too, he’d never seen a woman from this side of the Wall fight as men do. And unsurprisingly his first thought strayed home to Arya. Had she lived long enough, Arya would’ve worshipped this woman. While Jon never discouraged her proclivity for combat – he forged Needle, for Old Gods’ sake – he also believed her to be special. Alone in the world. No one else like her.

Maybe he was wrong. Or maybe not.

“Who are you?” he asked the woman. Followed her glance to Longclaw, left sheathed on the desk.

“Brienne, my lord,” she replied, body schooled straight, shoulders back, chin up. “Of House Tarth.”
“She’s in my service,” Sansa added from the partitioned bedroom.

She didn’t bother looking up, leaned one hand on the weirwood footboard and pet long strokes down Ghost’s back with the other. Content with the unfettered attention, Ghost rolled onto his side in her lap. Sansa sank slightly on the pallet, and at once fecund apologies sprouted on Jon’s tongue. For the flimsy pallet and unthreading coverlet and scratchy pillow, nothing like the featherbeds of home or the southern warmth she spooled herself in.

But then her shoulders deflated and the tension lanced from her body, and Jon saw her. She looked…

Gods, she looked like she could breathe. Again. Finally.

It halted every worry of complaint.

He managed something about a fire, but Brienne stayed him. “Podrick, a fire,” she enjoined, throwing a look at the muted squire. He burst forth, snaked between the two seats, and wet his knees on the hearth. His sleeves cracked as he pushed them off his wrist.

Jon wanted to insist on his tending to it, swore to Davos Sansa’s welfare was his responsibility, after all, and keeping her warm fell under that umbrella. Not to mention how long the boy took. Jon watched him stoke the tender nest, almost pained.

Eventually he scanned the room, drifting eventually to Sansa. As usual. Old habits die hard, he mused, shrunk back in time and peeking around trees and corners just to snatch a glimpse of the strawberry girl.

The pallid winter light marred her alabaster skin in shadows, in rings and wrinkles and scabs, jumped prominent before sweet flames erased them from view. They burned embers in Jon’s gut; he was supposed to be cut up with scars, not her. Never her. He knew politics roughed court into its own battlefield and wrought its own wars, remembered trying to warn before they said their last goodbyes, but…

What they did to her…

They – Joffrey, the Lannisters, whoever – beat her quiet. They roughed her and dulled her flame to its wick, all in the name of submission and obedience. It set another stone on his chest to think of being rough with her, by hands or words, if he wanted to know anything of her journey. Or her horrors.

No, he couldn’t do that to her. Wouldn’t do that to her. No matter how Davos badgered him or stamped on his toes or accounted his return, Jon declared he’d wait until Sansa freely gave her explanation.

She deserved that much.

“Sansa.” He eased into the bedroom, swatting at Ghost’s flank to make room. Ghost simpered low in his throat, but didn’t so much as lift his hackles. Or budge. Strange. Jon squatted against the wall.

“When did you last eat?”

She didn’t answer, squeezed one of Ghost’s ears in her hand and gently tugged.

A spark snapped in the air, and Jon peeked around the jamb to find the dry leaves caught, a tongue of fire sputtering to life. Orange charged the room’s disheartened veneer. Even Sansa’s paled hair blazed as luminous as he remembered, blemishes vanished from her skin, wear softened. Scrubbed
clean a little and she’d be exactly the picture of her he carried around in his mind.

“I’ll find something for you to eat,” he said. “Would you like me to draw you a bath?”

“Perhaps later,” she replied.

He seized her full attention, gaze roving up to him as he slid up the wall and pressed in close to her. A hand softly on her neck, Jon deposited a kiss in her hair, rested his forehead on hers and squeezed his eyes shut. He felt her grasp his sleeve. Felt her tremble.

“Thank the Gods you’re safe,” he whispered. She nodded, mashing her lips together. “I’ll return.”

Another kiss and her fingers pried from him, he vacated the room. “May I speak with both of you for a moment?” he beckoned as he passed Brienne.

He held the door open expectantly, and Podrick hustled by him quickly, hands knotted and chin pointed firmly to the floorboards whining under his feet. Brienne, however, good knight she was, good sworn shield she installed herself as, looked to Sansa to be excused. Only on permission did she quit her post and clank out.

Resisting the voice sat on one shoulder screaming at him to instruct Sansa lock the door behind him and comforted by the opposing voice reminding him she had a direwolf splayed in her lap, Jon led the pair to an arcade. He checked up and down the gangway and attested for himself its emptiness. Just a moment he needed with these two to harvest the details he was too consternated to ask Sansa on.

Then he’d forage for something in the kitchen and return to her. And then never leave her. Not again.

He rounded on Brienne and Podrick. The latter gawked at the Wall. The years stationed at the Wall’s feet made Jon often forget the majesty of it, of always standing at the perceived end of the world. He’d been to the precipice and beyond, passed underneath it and climbed over it, and once it had been magnificent, a paramount step closer to heaven he could actually touch.

Now… Doom lurked on the other side, the Long Night at its side. The Wall was forged from ice and as the winter grew longer and colder, Jon feared it was only a matter of time before someone shattered it and the doom wasn’t on their doorstep but crossing the threshold.

He’d agree to Winterfell if only to get Sansa farther from it. If she believed him. So few people did. He doubted divulging it even to Podrick would tamp down his awe. Not with how his hand balled and opened, balled and opened, lusting dangerously to reach out and press his palm to the ice.

Jon crossed his arms over his chest. “Tell me everything you know.”

Brienne blinked at him. “All of it, my lord?”

“All of it,” Jon affirmed. “Don’t leave a name out.”

He didn’t recognize many that prattled out from her arduous journey, but he knew enough. Lysa Tully and Petyr Baelish, the turncloak puppeteer. Robin Arryn, son of the man who began this, who took his father and scattered the rest of his family. She recounted identifying Sansa dining at an inn with Lord Baelish and the unpleasant conversation had upon approach.

“She looked like you then,” she commented. “She’d dyed her hair black and traveled under an alias. Identified herself as Lord Baelish’s niece, Alayne.”
Jon muttered a curse under his breath and scrubbed a hand down his face. “Then what?”

“I informed her of my oath pledged to her mother, Lady Catelyn, and offered her my protection. However, Lord Baelish polluted her ear.”

“How?”

“After reminding her I was a complete stranger, he told her I had sworn fealty to Lady Catelyn and Renly Baretheon and both were dead, proving my incompetence. He invited Podrick and me to join his group as to avoid unsafe roads. It was a trick, my lord.”

The interaction escalated and a fight broke through the inn, she and Podrick narrowly escaping Lord Baelish’s clutches. His guards gave chase, but resigned quickly, she said, and she followed Sansa all the way to Winterfell, diverging at Moat Cailin to Winter town where they encamped in another inn and her watch began.

“Lord Baelish delivered her to Roose Bolton. She was married to Ramsay Bolton shortly thereafter.” Brienne averted her gaze, grinding her palm into the pommel of her sword. “From town gossip and my observations, he was rather violent with her. Servants said she screamed every night he visited her bed.”

Brienne continued speaking, something about northern loyalty and persuading a man to deliver a message to the donjon Ramsay locked Sansa away in. Jon heard none of it. Fury leeched his veins, pulverizing him with an unimaginable force. Like nothing he’d felt before. That stone one his chest chipped away and tumbled into his gut. The pebbles hit the sizzle of his stomach floor and roasted, became coals steam rose from. Shot from his ears and his nose and his fingers that gripped his biceps painfully tight.

Words he’d never use in front of a lady ricocheted about his head, bounced off each other in long slurs. One escaped.

“My lord?”

Both stared at him, Brienne’s brows pulled together in confusion. For some reason that surprised Jon; as a knight, he expected her to be surrounded by the filth of men’s language. “My apologies,” he said all the same. “Did Sansa receive your message?”

“I believe so. But I abandoned my mission to enact a personal revenge,” she confessed. “In doing so I missed the candle she lit in the window. I failed her.”

“No,” Jon protested, clapping a hand on her shoulder. “You got her here. You gave her back to me. That is not failure. You forever have my gratitude. Both of you.”

Brienne doffed her head and tucked her hands behind her back. Waiting. Sansa had escaped, clearly, but neither Brienne nor Podrick could attest to how she survived. She hadn’t shared the detail. Slipping from a postern gate or smuggled in the hay of someone’s cart would’ve proved risky. As would excusing herself for a stroll in the godswood and making a run for it; she’d never outrun the range of the archers.

How else, then, but a jump.

If she jumped it was a miracle. Every parapet was dozens of feet tall. And there were only so many she wouldn’t be seen from. Davos was right; no one would let her go without a fight, chiefly that brutal bastard of a husband. To match toes with a Bolton, to commit themselves to avenge not just Robb and Lady Stark but for the monstrosities against Sansa…
Jon lifted his eyes to Brienne. “Are you a loyalist?”

“Yes, my lord. To Lady Sansa.”

“You’ll stay in Castle Black until we determine our next course of action?” Brienne nodded. Jon asked the same of Podrick to exact results. “Good,” he sighed. “We’ll need you. When the Boltons come for her—”

“She’ll need more than a three-man army,” Brienne concluded.

“We’ll need the whole fucking North.”

Jon rarely ventured into the kitchen. As a steward and before, any reprimand from Lord Commander Mormont came with a shovel to muck out the stalls or a night’s double shift in the bastion. Sam didn’t mind being relegated to cook staff, used the pockets of time to skim through his books, but to Jon, of every room in Castle Black, it smelled the worst. Like it was rotting around him, dank and fetid with whatever concoction brewed.

It didn’t smell any less unpleasant today. A soup bubbled on the kettle and its perfume wasn’t bad. A tinge stronger and it would’ve masked the odor emanating from the table where a cut of two-day-old seasoned mutton lay on a scrape of cloth. There’d been distraction enough over the past few days, and the last of Hobb’s store suffered the consequences. Left unattended on the clay, the slab’s sides were charred accordingly. And leathered sickly gray and brow. Jon’s stomach turned.

His feet propped up on the table and skinned an apple, Davos tipped his chair back on its hind legs, unperturbed by the wretched stench. “Have you learned anything?” Of why Sansa’s here, of what she wants floated between them tacitly.

“Not yet. What soup is this?” Jon asked him, leaning over to peek in the pot. A round soup bone bobbed to the surface.

“Potage,” Davos answered. Sheared of nearly half a curl, he ate a flake off his knife, heedless of the exposed apple browning in spots.

“Pea or bean legume?”

“Bean.”

Jon foraged through the cupboards for a wooden bowl and ladled the soup in, careful to get more bean than bone. He plucked a spoon from the hodgepodge of utensils on the counter and stopped, drumming his fingers. Sansa looked in desperate need of water, of which he could easily provide her, but he remembered a girl who preferred honeyed milk. Or that bitter tea he had no taste for if she was in the company of visiting illustrious ladies. He witnessed Lady Stark slip her a goblet of spiced wine once; just the thought of Sansa’s twisted face and how she tried to hide it broke an unquenchable grin on his.

“Oh, the boy can smile,” Davos suddenly intoned, interrupting Jon’s reminisce. “Now that you have her back, have you reconsidered resigning as Lord Commander?”

This.

Again.
Three moons lording over the night and three suns hidden under a gray blanket Davos prodded Jon with this same line of discourse. Over and over and over again. Not breathed on deaf ears exactly, but Jon wished he’d stable the conference. Just for now. Just so Jon could enjoy his sister being alive and reunited with him, could relish how rejuvenated he felt at the sight of her, and maybe share in that jubilance.

He knew Davos saw plenty things more than he did and while a very small part of him agreed with the man’s merits, the majority of him recognized his stance on the matter came from a selfish place, one beyond reason. That same part of him cylindered his attention to Sansa and nothing but Sansa. Impregnable and undeterred.

Bending over the counter, Jon hanged his head, hands clasping the back of his neck. “Ser, I don’t wish to discuss this a—”

“I’m sure you find my squawking irritating,” Davos said, up from his chair and to Jon’s side of the room, “but I still think you were hasty with your decision.”

“I can’t do any good here,” Jon asserted a bit too loudly. “I died—”

“Aye. You died.” The thunder of it rumbled like an explosion out of Davos. Jon flickered down to the knife imprinted in Davos’ hand, how the blade pointed almost menacingly at him. Another reminder. Between him and Melisandre, they harbored a wealth of reminders. Colluded to never let him forget. “You died and then you came back from the dead. Migrating south or joining the wildlings is not your destiny.”

“You sound like the Red Woman,” Jon accused. Her faith and her visions and her prophecies hotly found his ear, always the same, always fraught with talk of princes and Azor Ahai and Lightbringer. Like it meant something to him. Like it was supposed to mean something to him.

“After everything I’ve seen her do, perhaps she’s right.”

Jon exhaled heavy. “I died. I’m relieved of my oath. Nothing holds me here. My sole concern is Sansa. Where she goes, I go. Until that’s determined, she’s safest here and she will remain as long as she needs.”

“But where will you decide to go?” Davos questioned. “If you travel west you’ll end up back in the clutches of the man who sold her to the Boltons. She’s suspected in poisoning Joffrey Baratheon so anywhere south of Riverrun will have her head for treason. With the Tyrells half on the throne you couldn’t seek asylum in Highgarden either.”

“Sam has family in Horn Hill,” Jon related. “We can go there.”

“She’s safest here in the north.”

Hands braced on the tabletop, he shook his head. “She’s—”

“She’s your sign. Ramsay Bolton will come for her, so ready for his insurgency. All the northern banners would rally around Ned Stark’s daughter if they knew she’d returned.” Davos leaned closer, voice lowering. “It’s time, Jon. Move against the Boltons. Take back Winterfell and secure the north.”

Jon shoved hard off the table, knuckle bumping into the bowl and soup sloshing out. “I’ve been estranged from my sister for years and now she’s here and I’m still wrapping my head around it. Do not attempt to discipline me with your prophecies. I’ve done you a kindness by listening to them. But I don’t want that future. I don’t want to fight.”
Nothing passed from Davos in response. He couldn’t change Jon’s tide, his enterprise a fool’s errand at the moment. Released by the silence, Jon swung a tankard on his finger and filled it to the brim, slurping ale off the top. He balanced the bowl disastrously between chest and elbow crook and wrapped his fingers around the tankard, steps timid and slow.

Davos halted him at the door. “Will you still say that when Ramsay Bolton is beating down your door? Or when the Others come over the Wall and invade your realm?”

Jon sawed his teeth and proceeded on his way.

He expected Brienne to be there, sentinel at the door, but she was gone, probably off settling in whatever solar Edd spared. Purposefully, it seemed, making herself scarce. Not on request – he knew better; adolescence under Catelyn Stark’s roof drilled into Jon that, as a baseborn, any unchaperoned encounter with a lady would ruin her reputation – but for preservation. To let him and Sansa pass the hours relearning each other.

However, trepidation stilled Jon’s fist in mid-air. Fear of going in and finding Sansa gone, finding she never existed at all. Fear of going in and finding her right where he left her, still eminently woebegone. He didn’t know which outcome scared him more. Both unmanned him, leapt his heart into his throat.

Would Sansa even want him?

The unknown of that scared him the most.

His forehead fell on the door. Then his fist. “Sansa,” he said. Rapped once more and let him himself in.

She lay on his bed like a tucked bud, clenched and swaddled in his cloak. Unthreaded from its braid, her hair drooped over her face and had she not braced a hand under herself to unfurl, he’d have mistaken her for slumbering. Ghost was balled up on her feet, but when she withdrew from his body he woke, red eyes assessing her before flopping over onto Jon’s pillow. Jon would’ve chided him for it before.

(That, he didn’t want to think about. How cleaved in two he felt. A first life and a second. Before and after. Then and now. He didn’t know how he fit into the world anymore nevertheless anyone else. Sansa was a welcome distraction.)

He motioned to the door. “May I lock this? Will it bother you?”

Leaning against the wall and drawing her legs, Sansa shook her head. Jon wasted precious little time clink the bar into place.

“I would’ve brought you lemon cakes if I could,” he said, “but we’ve only got soup.”

“Thank you,” she breathed.

She took the offered bowl in her bare hands and just held it. Gingerly, as not to lose a drop of the broth. Close, inhaling its warmth. She closed her eyes on the first spoonful; Jon knew the feeling well, teeth chattering and numb all the way to your toes until the soup drains down your throat, hot from your chest to your gut. An elixir to cure anything.

“This is the coldest winter I think I’ve ever felt,” she commented. “It killed everything before we could hunt.”
Jon smirked, teased, “We?”

He thought better of the jest when Sansa stared unmoving at him. He gulped and opened his mouth to apologize, but then a smile cracked her surface. “Fine, then,” she relented with a heady roll of her eyes. “Before Podrick could hunt.”

“Is he any good?”

“No. Not really.” And again she infected him, stirred him in a way that’d stun his fellow Night’s Watch, those who’d seen but one or two smiles from Ned Stark’s bastard on so sullen a perch.

Gods, he couldn’t stop staring at her. Didn’t know how she was real.

Sansa must’ve felt as much because she looked up at him too, how he swayed on his feet, uncertain of himself in his own chambers (of which he gladly relinquished to her; he’d sleep at his desk or on the hearth or in the hall, no matter as long as she was safe). “Sit with me?” she beckoned.

They hadn’t sat together in the confines of a plush bed since they were small enough not to make noise sneaking from room to room. At four years old, Sansa had gone through a period of being frightened by the dark and often sought solace in her older brothers, beseeched them to generate stories of knights who fought the dark, of a righteous few defying a great evil.

What little kindness Lady Stark had shown Jon Snow plummeted upon discovering their secret. Sansa likewise stopped coming to his room.

“You’re certain?”

“Please?”

She scooted aside and Jon crawled into the space, a sliver of one really, just enough between her and the footboard to stretch his legs out in front of him. A smile twitched the corner of Sansa’s lips, and Jon chuckled, furrowed his brows in a what. She chuckled too, curled a lock of hair behind her ear. Her cinched knees knocked on his, and Jon wondered if she was remembering, if she remembered it at all. He hoped she did.

They sat together against the wall, the two of them, shoulder to shoulder for the first time in a dozen long years. Sansa stirred her soup, imbibed it down to the dredges, and Jon nursed his ale, the silence not awkward as he expected but comfortable. Lenitive.

He’d gladly stay cloistered in this room, just him, Sansa, and Ghost. Locking out the bad and rebuilding the good.

Alas.

“Do you not trust your brothers?”

From any other person the query would’ve been hushed, tentative, considered out of bounds to ask the brotherhood something so blasphemous, especially while housed in their compound. But Sansa, she trod over the question tall and with her hand raised.

Jon tilted his head inquisitively. “You locked the door,” she clarified.

“Oh,” and he couldn’t help his glance from stealing that way. “I wish the answer was yes.”

“It’s not?”
“I want to trust them, but I can’t reciprocate trust any more than they can give it to me.” He swirled a finger around his tankard’s rim. “I sleep with one eye open these days and I hate it.”

Sansa nodded, a little sadness pulling a frown into place. “I remember the first time I ever heard you mention being a ranger. I was playing Hide with Arya and it was her turn to find me so I ran off to the stables to hide in one of the stalls. But I found you and Robb in there. You said because you didn’t have an ancestral title like Robb and you didn’t have any duties to shirk, you wanted to be a ranger of the Night’s Watch like Uncle Benjen.”

“Uncle Benjen,” Jon hummed fondly.

“I remember thinking it sounded the perfect place for you. Not because I wanted to get rid of you – though I was awful enough, you must’ve thought that—”

“I didn’t.”

“I thought it was perfect because you’d be safe. There’d be no one there to use your lineage against you.”

So Lady Stark hadn’t cordoned Sansa off from him, not completely. And what little she had Sansa eroded on her own. Jon didn’t know why it warmed him. “I thought you’d be safe in King’s Landing,” he confessed.

“How wrong we both were,” she muttered.

He tried to estimate where her scars were, hidden underneath her clothes or ribboning her insides. After what Brienne suspected she endured, Sansa had to have scars. He’d marvel if she didn’t, if she miraculously came out unscathed. Doubtful, sure, but he’d pray on it. For her.

“You don’t need to tiptoe around me,” she said. “Ask what you incline to know.”

Jon almost tittered. How do you ask someone to articulate their tragedy? How do you ask someone to show you their scars? “Your companions told me a little,” he hedged, “but I want you to want to tell me the rest.”

“What did they say?”

“They said they encountered you in an inn with Lord Baelish and you refused their offer of protection. They said a row broke out and you were separated from them, but they followed you to Winterfell where you were married to House Bolton. They said you escaped, but neither knew the details of how.”

“I jumped. I ran,” Sansa explained. She set the bowl aside, nothing but a few wilted herbs stuck to the sides, and curled in on herself, a new wall of her own making erecting right there in front of him. Jon bent forward, getting in her tumult thoughts. “If I’d gone with them in the first place. If I hadn’t been so rude and—”

He grabbed her hand, squeezed it tight. It slighted her attention to him, just enough for him to take hold. “You can’t contemplate ifs,” he told her. “You’re here. You survived.”

“By the skin of my teeth.”

“But you did it. I always saw Arya as the fighter of you two, but you’ve proven me wrong, Sansa. You fought for your life and you survived. Do you understand how brave that is?”
Sansa barked a laugh, echoing the word. “What’s brave about me, Jon? Ramsay Bolton bedded me nearly every night and I never fought him. I never made an attempt on his life—”

“Which was smart, Sansa.” He sighed, pushing at the nail digging into the back of his skull. “If you had attacked him he’d have killed you. From the sounds of him, he wouldn’t have hesitated either.”

“No,” she agreed. “I was a thing to him. He only ever wanted his father’s name and when he got that he wanted his father’s title.”

She quieted for a moment. Ghost dreamed at the other end of the bed, paws jerking and sounds harrumphing from him. Sansa ran her palm down his leg, but he did not wake, too entranced. He and Lady were the deep sleepers of the litter.

“Roose Bolton’s new wife is pregnant, Jon. If the baby is born a boy… Ramsay won’t stand for it. He’ll slaughter the whole house to prevent another heir from stealing from him. Or anyone stealing from him.”

She meant for the statement to engender him into action, like a good, hard kick in a steed’s side. Jon wasn’t a craven man by any means, led the charge in more battles than he expected when he swore his oath, but what she implored…that the Night’s Watch billow the Stark banner and run at death like little boys thought it glorious to…

She clutched his hand so tight it burdened him to reveal, “The men won’t follow my orders.”

“Why—?”

Her skin was so soft. “Because I’m not Lord Commander anymore, Sansa. I resigned from my post.”

Unwaveringly focused on her, Jon shifted forward in the stiff jerkin and unfastened the buckle at his collar, then the next two on his sides. Pulled the cords to the quilted tunic beneath. He hadn’t looked at the indelible wounds since his second first breath, buried them under layers and layers and more layers, but the memory of it, the weight, it rushed through him again at Sansa’s reaction.

Tears sprang immediately to her eyes. She smothered a gasp behind her hand, smothered his name whimpered. His gaze hardened. “My men – my brothers – did this to me. I had to execute the betrayers for mutiny. One of them was a child, Sansa, no older than Bran.”

“Why would they do this to you?”

Because violence begot violence. Because men desired the things that’d destroy them in the end. His whole life Jon desired belonging somewhere, to someone. He desired the realm’s safety. And he was murdered for it.

“The White Walkers Old Nan told us ghost stories about, they’re real,” he explained. “I’ve spent time with the free folk since coming here and I persuaded them to migrate south of the Wall. I told them it was to save them from the winter, but I lied. I wanted to prevent the White Walkers from growing in numbers—”

“Growing?”

“If you’re killed by a White Walker you come back from the dead as a Wight. I’ve seen it. I was trying to avoid the calamity, but my brothers didn’t approve. They called me a traitor and one by one they stuck a blade in me.”

“How did you survive?”
"I didn’t."

He told her all of it, everything he could remember, from lying in his snowy death bed to the nothing waiting to greet him. To waking and how and the cold he felt – still felt.

Sansa counted the slits in his belly as he counted the traitors in his garrison. Her lower lip trembled. And when the story spun to its end and his voice tapered off, abandoning them in another silence, she kissed his brow, the corner of his eye. Jon wrapped an arm around her and gathered her close. She nestled, happily ensnared, and wound her own arms around him. Her shaky breathing evened.

Oh, yes, he marveled at her. Terrorized by the abrasive customs of men since their father’s execution, he expected she made fast friends with distrust, particularly in the company of men, family or not (Lord Baelish certainly played himself thus and look how he treated her, trading her like gold), and yet there she was.

His fingers skimmed up and down her back. Hers clutched his jerkin. "I died too," she whispered. "Every night Ramsay came to my bed. Every night he raped me."

That word rekindled those embers in Jon’s stomach. A tear slipped down Sansa’s cheek and he whipped it away, hated seeing her scars as flush to the skin as his. "I’m so sorry, Sansa. I would’ve come for you if I’d known. I’d never have left you there with him."

"I thought of writing you so many times."

"I wish you had," he said into her hair. A shiver rattled through her, digging her fingers harder into Jon’s side. He opened his palm and rubbed her back, pet her hair. She shivered again. "Come with me. You’ll be warmer in front of the fire."

Sansa moaned. "I’m content here."

"You say that, but you have gooseflesh."

She moaned again as Jon pulled her to her feet. The shifting bed roused Ghost and he bumped into their legs jumping down, slithered between them on his way into the anteroom. He laid between the two bowed saddle stools Sansa and Jon each occupied, fading to sleep in a matter of minutes.

Jon moved to set his tankard on the floor by his feet, but Sansa stopped him, a finger pointed at the ale. Smirking, he passed the tankard to her. She coughed on a long pull and Jon laughed, and then their stories tumbled out as easily.

Soon they were knee-deep in demons.

Chapter End Notes

Jon and Sansa have reunited and confided their demons in each other, but what happens when Sansa’s closest demon demands she be returned? Look for the next chapter soon.
where you are, I will be

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

So, I had this whole chapter written and then I decided I hated everything about it. I just couldn’t get past how ashamed of it I was. So I started rewriting it Friday night, and finished all of half an hour ago. So...my apologies if it's spotty?

Come and see.

Come and see.

Come and see.

The letter haunted Sansa from the moment of its arrival, dripping red wax like the dead-man seal was a harbinger of things to come. Damn the man, damn his words, the missive was as odious as its author. Not even sewing snarling wolves quelled the visions Sansa had of its promises. And they were promises; she knew that much of Ramsay Bolton. If the Lannisters paid their debts, the Boltons always got their pound of flesh.

Only the six at the table were privy to its goading. To Rickon and his dire fate which inarguably had to be salvaged. Brienne had given testimony to Arya’s wellbeing and Jon had relayed his friend’s encounter with Bran, but Rickon was the unknown. The lost. And now that they found him again, unharmed at least for now, Sansa refused to abandon him in the possession of a man in wolf’s clothing.

Snatching the parchment from Jon’s hands, she’d read the letter over. Once aloud. Once to herself. Studied it for a long spell as if the ink would drain off the page and be rendered meaningless. Empty. But no, they were still there, waving Rickon in her face. She ran, but he trapped her brother in her place.

Their eyes had shifted to each other, a telling beat waiting for someone else the discussion of who – and how – to mobilize. The question of what to do needn’t be asked in their group. No one dared breathe anything of a white flag. No one suggested readily tucking tail and running. Sansa didn’t know how she’d look at anyone who did.

Tormund – Giantsbane, Sansa recalled from Jon’s introduction, strange to her but mayhaps not in his clan – ran a hand over his head and with a voice he couldn’t resolve to absolute confidence, said, “Send her back.”

The table froze. Jon, up from the bench and pacing laps around them, pivoted in place. And growled. A low, tenebrous sound stuttered out like rocks crumbling off the mountains. As inhuman and wild a
sound as Sansa ever heard. She caught his wrist in hand.

The wildling, however, harrumphed at him. “Quit your grunting, Jon Snow, and hear me.”

“You can’t give her back,” Brienne exclaimed indignantly. Had she Oathkeeper been belted to her person, she’d have drawn it on the man, seared it to his throat and ordered he retract so vile a suggestion.

“I said ‘send’, not ‘give’,” he claimed. “The difference being one she does by choice and the other by force.”

Jon braced his knuckles on the table, effectively cordoning his sister off from any scheme to separate them again. They’d hardly parted ways long enough to bathe, Ghost constantly trotting alongside Sansa and Jon never far behind. Sansa thought she’d feel stifled by the lack of privacy, by the constancy, but if anything she craved Jon’s nearness even more, went out of her way to earn it. When he’d offered to move her to King’s Tower she declined, adamant to make up for lost time.

They ate together and walked the grounds together and warily slept, in the same bed or alone in it, a watchful eye always on the other.

Sometimes when they sat together in front of the fire, Sansa threading her needle and Jon flicking through a book his friend, Sam, left behind in a poor bid to get him reading more, she had sudden flashbacks of spying Mother and Father much the same way. Contently together. Contently in silence. Sneaking small smiles at each other. Hearts in their eyes.

She’d yet to tire of their time together, hoped and prayed she never did tire of it. As she hoped and prayed their moments together stayed intact once they landed on Winterfell soil again.

Tormund didn’t so much as quaver under Jon’s relentless scowl. “You send her back to Winterfell and that shit, and when night falls she slips from her chambers and opens any side door there is. She lets us in and we slaughter them in their sleep.”

“No,” Jon responded instantly.

Sansa nodded, added, “It’d never work anyhow.”

She hated the little leer quirking the corner of Tormund’s lips. Hated the way his hand crawled halfway to her. “If it frightens you—”

“It doesn’t.” Lie. “He doesn’t.” Lie. “I’m finished being afraid of him.” True. “Your idea would fail because Ramsay’s more likely to kill me on sight than allow me to walk freely about the castle without his supervision or one of his hounds after me.”

“Then what do you suggest? You have two thousand men against five thousand,” Tormund reiterated. As if Sansa needed reminding. As if it wasn’t another element of the letter that haunted her, knowing how outmatched they were to the army Ramsay amassed through his reign of pure terror.

“You’re backed into a corner,” said Eddison Tollett.

The name stunted Sansa when first she heard it. The Tolletts were sworn to House Royce, the lord of whom Sansa encountered several times during her stay at the Vale. He was one of a select few she divulged her true identity to when wearing the Alayne Stone disguise. He now fostered Robin Arryn. If Sansa could stomach it, contacting the young lord and inquiring on the Knights of the Vale might not be such a bad idea.
She’d decided to stable it then, to bring it up with Jon at a later time. Now was that time. But maybe in private. While Jon knew of Petry Baelish’s treachery, he’d have a clearer mind than hers to rationally discuss its merits and pitfalls. Of her reservations, the one that curdled in her the most was allowing Petyr anywhere near Jon.

“Where are you going to find three thousand more men?” Edd further inquired.

“We’ll need more than that,” Brienne assessed. She moved her fork over a hairsbreadth and laced her fingers together on the table. “You don’t walk into war, you run. And you don’t match your enemy’s numbers, you overwhelm them.”

“Victories aren’t always won by the side with the largest army, my lady.”

The remark tickled Tormund to snickering. Brienne narrowed her eyes at him, but it did little to assuage his reaction. To Edd she asked, “Will any of the Night’s Watch fight if you give them reprieve?”

“No,” Jon answered for him. And left it at that.

He’d returned to pacing since shooting down Tormund’s subterfuge plan and now in possession of a roll, he ripped it apart, dusting the floor in crumbs. He didn’t nibble on the pieces, but shredded them and shredded them until they weren’t big enough to lob at his plate. While the others talked around her, Sansa watched him, distressed by his stress.

She knew he wouldn’t turn his cheek on Ramsay’s threats, wouldn’t leave her in the cold, but he wasn’t groomed like Robb, like Bran. Any lesson he learned about politics and ways of the court were picked up secondhand. He wasn’t taught that in necessary times you climb down from your ivory tower and solicit assistance, that feuds can be paused for the good of the realm. He was reticent enough to confide in Ser Davos Seaworth (something she tried to inveigle otherwise; as a vassal and right hand of Stannis Baratheon, he’d prove an invaluable ally and war council member).

Absentmindedly scratching the parchment, Sansa halted the discussion at hand and declared, “We have to rally support from the other houses. This fight is as much for them as it is us. If Ramsay wins they’ll be forced to bow to his rule.”

“Agreed.” Jon squeezed back into place between Edd and Tormund, sprinkling the roll shreds onto his plate and clapping his hands free of residue crumbs. “The question is…who?”

“I’d count the Umbers out,” Sansa said. “Smalljon Umber is a lot less forgiving than his father.”

“As is Harhold Karstark. We may be kin, but Robb executed his father for enacting revenge on the Lannisters. The new lord will never return his support.” Jon stared into space for a moment, at a spot just past Sansa’s right shoulder. “Sansa, have many houses have sworn to Ramsay?”

She dragged a hand through her hair, detangled straight and sleek. “The Karstarks, the Umbers. House Hornwood, House Locke, House Ryswell, House Cerwyn… Those are the only ones I remember.”

“House Cerwyn?” Brienne echoed, taken back. “Truly?”

Jon shared in the feeling. “But they’re Winterfell’s closest bannermen.”

“Ramsay used to boast about flaying Medger Cerwyn and his wife for refusing to pay taxes. Cley Cerwyn swore allegiance to him because he had little other choice,” Sansa suspected.
“He flayed their lord, eh?” Tormund said. “It might motivate them.”

“Or blind them into getting involved for the wrong reasons,” Jon countered.

“If we want to send a request to Lord Cerwyn we have to do so sneakily. And make sure the right hands receive it,” Sansa said. “They’re half a day’s ride from Winterfell, which makes them harder to get to. They’re directly in Ramsay’s ken.”

She flicked the scroll to the center of the table, atop the half-eaten pan of rolls. It bristled in the breeze from an open window; she wished the breeze would cart it off. She wanted nothing Ramsay’s touched anywhere near her. “But if we secure House Cerwyn we also secure House Condon.” Jon piqued a brow at her. “Ser Kyle Condon was right hand to Medger Cerwyn. I doubt his loyalty died with his lord.”

And around and around they went, to every stretch of the territory.

To House Mormont on Bear Island, home of Longclaw but a poor nation woodsmen and fisherfolk, defended by the women left on the shores.

To House Tallhart, seating in Torrhen’s Square behind thirty feet-tall walls of pure stone, one of Winterfell’s principal bannermen with House Glover and thus the surest bet of support.

To the various tribes in the mountains and in the forests, a rival in numbers but unreliable in answering any call for warriors.

To House Reed, though Sansa kept it to herself for now.

“What about House Manderly?” Jon ventured after they’d exhausted everyone else.

“House Manderly?” Sansa scoffed incredulously.

She should’ve felt chastised for being unable to douse it, should’ve felt guilty for the look on Jon’s face. But House Manderly? Yes, Wyman Manderly had his port and the profusion of workers come with it. And yes, his family owed their holdings to the Starks. But the man kept his city at a three hundred and fifty-mile distance, rarely to be crossed. And that was just the trek from Winterfell. Tack on the King’s Road from Castle Black’s gates to the Starks’ door and you’d exhaust any bird before it completed those six hundred more miles.

“White Harbor’s a bit further than I meant,” Sansa objected.

“They have eight thousand men, Sansa,” Jon quarreled.

“Pulled from a half dozen other houses—”

“A half dozen more we need.”

And another facet of his lack of nurturing reared its ugly head. By no fault of his own, of course, but Sansa mashed her lips together and wrung her hands in her lap, stared at the splinters in the table’s planks. This was the man she worried on encountering at Castle Black, a monger made feral by the Wall and who only thought from the warfare side of things.

He needed to remember there were other sides, ones that orchestrated the battles and were there still when the wars were won or lost, a political side of roundtables and glad-handing. Sansa wanted to be that for him, wanted to stand at his side and he at hers, and to do so she needed to hook his chin and coax him to see eye to eye with her.
A feat by any other word, but one she’d gladly surge into.

“Jon,” she said calmly, “I agree Lord Manderly’s forces would be crucial to retaking our home, but there are factors to consider. All things take time, including ravens. And the inordinate amount Lord Mandedrly would need to rally his houses. We don’t know when Ramsay intends to make good on his threats and if he catches us unawares…”

“He won’t.” Dulcet words for empty promises. Jon’s shoulders stooped a hair. “But if our goal is to overpower Ramsay, we need the Manderlys.”

He was right, and that immutable feeling soured Sansa’s stomach. Ramsay had already stretched his fingers as long as Petyr, infested every house rich and poor closest to Winterfell. White Harbor was the farthest away and therefore, hopefully, far enough from his clutches.

“Maybe…” Edd trailed off, a murmur to begin with and spoken to his plate. Jon encouraging him forth with a bumped elbow, he cleared his throat and tried again. “Maybe you should be less concerned with increasing your numbers and more with decreasing his.”

“How do you decrease your opponent’s numbers?” Podrick asked, so milquetoast at the end of the table Sansa forgot he dined with them.

Edd shrugged. “Distract him. Do the Boltons still occupy the Dreadfort?”

“You want to send our soldiers to House Bolton’s seat as a diversion?” Sansa hazarded a guess. A wild guess, because this man couldn’t be serious. They were having a hard enough time deciding who to align with without dwindling themselves for the sake of an illusion.

Not that she knew the wildlings were decent fighters. They might be horrendous. Maybe Jon pushed so hard for seasoned outside support because he knew they were rubbish. Maybe they wouldn’t be an asset on the battlefield at all. Maybe their contribution did lie elsewhere.

But at the Dreadfort?

Could that even work?

Brienne seemed to read her thoughts, for she dismissed the idea on the spot. “It’s even less likely to work than the wildling’s plot.”

“Actually,” Sansa heard herself say, “it might.” The table eyed her, some parts skeptical, others curious. “Ramsay campaigned for the Bolton name. He did everything Roose Bolton asked of him, including act as castellan at the Dreadfort. It’s his home. He won’t stand his home being conquered.” Her eyes drifted to Tormund. “Especially by the free folk. You said you have two thousand able bodies to fight? The Dreadfort has mayhaps a five hundred-man garrison. Send half of your warriors to raid the castle and it might give Ramsay cause to post men from his own army to defend it.”

“Half to the Dreadfort and half to the front lines?” Jon said.

Brienne shook her head. “No northern army will fight alongside a wildling.”

“Alright, send all of them,” Sansa said. “Ramsay will send more of his troops.”

“Theoretically.”

“Theoretically.”
She didn’t miss the smile that slipped onto Jon’s lips, didn’t miss his gaze soften on her. Pride ballooned in her chest. No one had ever looked at her like that. She never awed anyone or impressed anyone. She accrued wanton smirks and abased actions.

But never awe.

It was mildly addicting.

Jon instructed Edd to fetch him the mappings of letters, and the man did as bid, still obeying his Lord Commander and Jon still acting as Lord Commander, no matter how he restated otherwise. “Aren’t calls for bannermen customarily done in person?” he asked from behind the high table.

“Aye,” Jon answered. “But we’re more vulnerable outside these walls than we are in them.”

_I’m not leaving you_, his eyes told Sansa.

Her heart swelled to double its size.

The seat grown cold next to him, she transferred benches, sliding in beside Jon. No words sprang up at first; she instead coiled his tunic around her finger, pinched a string unthreading from his cuff and tried to fold it under. Recently she’d learned touching walked hand-in-hand with their unflagging together. How easy it was to touch him. How much she wanted to touch him. How much she did. How much he did.

(She never realized she took it for granted, touching. The intimacy of it. The trust. To touch the thing your fingers are starved for and trust it won’t snap your hand in its jaws.)

“I forgot someone we should contact,” she said. “Howland Reed.” Jon repeated the name slowly back to her. “His army isn’t vast, but he was Father’s friend. He fought at Tower of Joy. Remember Father telling us the story?”

Jon smiled, fondly swimming in memories. “Father and his six men against the Mad King’s kingsguard. Bran’s favorite.”

“Lord Reed is the last one still alive from that battle,” Sansa said thoughtfully. “You know Father’s stories better than I do. I’ll write all the letters to the others houses, but I want you to write to Lord Reed.”

“But why him? He’s as much a ghost as Greywater Watch is.”

“He was Father’s friend. If we ask this of him he won’t leave us in the lurch. I’m certain of it.”

Three riders and two birds were dispatched before twilight that very evening. The men were commanded to ride through the night with the cargo, their time constrained by a devil licking at their heels.

Jon and Sansa watched as the ravens lifted off from the rookery and the horse galloped through the doors. One seamless line at first, the men diverged just below the first hillock. Forked into odd directions like the birds squawking from the sky. Carrying all their hopes in a saddle bag and on a string.
One day passed.

Then two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

On day six the rest of the redoubt learned of Ramsay’s letter.

Not so much its content, for Jon locked it away in a desk drawer, but its existence, hanging a noose around Sansa’s neck. Tightening and tightening every day without a word in reply. Every day Ramsay could appear.

Needle in hand, Sansa proceeded outfitting the Stark sigil in Longclaw’s scabbard, a task she’d taken upon herself to scissor braid after braid of that rope. And it worked, for a time. Same as the wolves unfurling across the front of her dress and the back of their cloaks in luminous white thread, and carved in Jon’s brigandine, and any other band of leather she got her hands on.

Jon wore black like a standard and while Sansa gladly adopted the muted tone and its brotherly gray, while the stitches were ornamental and probably not something Jon would notice, they were the last vestiges of home. The pack left standing. If they were going to charge on the man stealing their den, they had better leave them no doubt who was coming.

If only the scabbard – wasn’t – so –

Sansa stuck the needle peevishly. Heaved her chest in a great sigh and dropped the half-finished snout in her lap. Rethought not for the first time why she decided to rectify Longclaw’s loss of sigil. And maybe the sword didn’t even need a sigil, capped in a wolf ferrule as it was. Nevertheless, she’d have to finish what she started, even if it took until Jon raged into war.

Slumbering mere feet away, Jon stirred onto his right side and battered the bedroom with a particularly loud snore. Slowly as not to disturb Jon, Sansa unsheathed Longclaw, just enough to glide her fingers over the fuller’s rippled pattern.

She thought all longswords were cumbersome on the hip for a reason, but holding it for the first time she found it lighter than expected. Valyrian steel, Jon had explained of her observation, one of a rare few left in the world. She’d grinned. “How honored I should feel that there are two protecting me,” the other resting at Brienne’s side.

The door creaked open, and Sansa tucked the silver blade back out of sight, tracing the crescent cross guard. Her name floated up behind her. Turning her head, Sansa welcomed Brienne’s disruption, motioning her forward.

Dressed out of her armor for a change, Brienne crouched down inside the threshold. “Pardon my intrusion, my lady,” she whispered. “Some of the Night’s Watch have demanded a conference with you and Lord Commander Snow in the common hall.”

Sansa frowned. “Right now?”

“Yes, my lady.”
“Concerning Ramsay’s letter?” Though Brienne need not tell her. Rumor of it found every ear left, from the subterranean wormwalks all the way up the winch elevator.

“Yes, my lady,” Brienne said anyway.

Sansa set Longclaw at her side, careful not to prick Ghost lying on the floor between her and Jon. Jon who bunched the coverlet in his left hand, his other arm slithered under the pillow and pinching a corner. His eyes moved rapidly under their lids, not quite a nightmare but not fancied either. Sansa uncrossed and crossed her legs, forestalling rousing him with a meek “But he’s exhausted.”

Not that that mattered. One eye open, he said. Never trust cruelty fueled by fear.

She sighed, conceded, “Alright. Thank you, Brienne. Please inform the assembly Jon and I will be with them shortly.”

The fair knight bowed and then left as quietly as she arrived.

Lifting her skirts and tiptoeing over Ghost, Sansa perched on the edge of the bed, frame whining under the added weight. Froth unbound from its tie the moment he hit the pallet, it fanned Jon’s nape, disappearing his scars and smoothing the hard lines he wore away from this room and away from Sansa.

His brothers were to blame. She’d hardly believed the abuse from his tales, but after witnessing it first-hand it couldn’t not be believed. Their hostility towards him had reached a fever pitch, her arrival ratcheting it up even higher, took form in purposefully bashed shoulders and snide comments in his ear. Unbecoming behavior of knights and certainly disrespectful to their former leader.

At least Jon found peace, if only temporarily.

Whispering his name sweetly, Sansa carded her fingers through Jon’s hair. Hit snags she heard break and tangles that didn’t. He groaned every time she unsnarled a knot, curling in on himself and trying to fold the pillow over his head and thus out of Sansa’s reach, and she vowed to wrangle him under a brush later. Ghost popped up and licked his hand, his face. Jon half-heartedly swatted at him.

“Jon,” Sansa sang, leaned to his ear like coaxing a child. “Jon, it’s time to wake up.”

He groped blindly until he seized her hand, cradled it under his chin and cinched her immobile under his arm. Sansa smiled and pet his head with her other hand. Jon groaned pitifully, added a hitch to drawl it out and spur Sansa’s giggle.

“See, now I know you’re awake.”

“No, I’m not,” Jon grunted.

“Your former comrades are waiting for us in the common hall to discuss Ramsay’s letter,” Sansa told him.

“Then, by all means, watch me spring out of bed.”

“Come now, Jon. They’re waiting for us.”

Jon rolled onto his back and threw an arm over his head. The other still clutched her hand to his chest, to his heart thumping against Sansa’s wrist. She felt it before, of course, ghosting over the topmost slash in his abdomen and feeling it steady as it goes, but every time it startled her he had one at all. Coming back from the dead and whatnot.
But then she shook out the silliness, called herself no better than the men who demanded his presence now. The men who, Edd once remarked to her, suspected him a devil fallen from grace. Whose trepidation was birthed from the realization that if he could come back from the dead then surely he could do much worse to any of them.

He peaked an eye open at her. “Did a raven come from New Castle?”

“No,” Sansa hated to reply. “Not yet.”

“What if Lord Manderly doesn’t answer?”

What she hated more, it turned out, was how defeated he sounded. The breath he expelled. The dejection contorting his mouth. Her stomach dropped. “Not yet doesn’t mean he won’t,” she hedged.

Jon hummed noncommittally. Sansa tugged on her hand and dragged him to his feet with her, filling the crevices betwixt his fingers with hers. He allowed her to lug him with, but he ambled down the stairs and through the halls at a snail’s pace. Not the least bit anxious to get to their destination, to share a room with men who hated him and who’d probably use this meeting to force him out the door.

He’d executed four of their brothers; Sansa was just the most recent excuse.

The forum stuffed the common hall to the seams, neglecting their posts to amass on their feet and mill between the tables and each other. Jon hesitated at the door and Sansa paused with him. She squeezed his hand and tried for a brave smile, one that felt watery at the edges but ultimately did exactly what she wanted. The tension evaporated off Jon’s shoulders.

“Stay,” he commanded Ghost.

It felt like walking into a wall, the silence that greeted them. The discordant chatter they heard thrumming from down the hall perished instantly. Dozens of eyes turned their way. Lady Melisandre slinked out of the shadows and along the wall of shuttered casements, but Jon urged Sansa in the opposite direction, to the dais where Edd occupied a chair at the high table.

He pulled out the two chairs next to him and Sansa sat in the center one, bookended by Edd and Jon and guarded by Brienne, facing the mob sure to ignite. Her hand hovered over Oathkeeper’s pommel and for some reason her being closest to Jon comforted Sansa.

The first to speak did so without preamble. “Tell us true, Jon Snow,” he bellowed. “Did you receive a letter from Lord Bolton?”

Ser Davos sat beside the man, the only one sitting, just a sliver glimpsed between the bodies, two tables back and four men to the left. Though the distance was too far to hear, Sansa knew his leather gloves squelched as he wrung them, an aggrieved set to his lips. His eyes met hers and she wanted to shrivel in her seat. She should’ve pushed Jon harder to talk to him. She should’ve done it herself.

“I did,” Jon confirmed for all the room to hear.

“What’d it say?” another shouted.

“Lord Bolton—” Jon cleared his throat, grip tightening on Sansa’s hand under the table. Ser Davos’ gaze flickered to him. “Lord Bolton has demanded I return Sansa to Winterfell or he will slaughter the free folk and every man in this camp.”

There. Done.
The secret was out of the bag.

Out in the open for everyone to know.

So why did Sansa still feel so embattled? Why didn’t it put her at ease?

The new information triggered the room, demolishing the quiet in a hailstorm of questions, angry things and each much louder than the one before it. The rabble schooled together, pressed in and in, oppressively closer to the high table. Brienne’s light touch on her sword wrapped around the grip, knees bending slightly and face hardening. Ready to flash her sword if anyone dared too close.

If only there was something in her arsenal to shield them from the flung words, coalescing into one monstrous reprisal. Like the riot in King’s Landing, the royal procession swarmed and clothes torn from Sansa’s body in the melee.

“Do what he wants,” one man yelled. “Pay the fucking ransom, Snow!” screamed someone else. Another: “This is fucking madness!” Another: “She isn’t worth our lives.” And another: “What’s one life if it means all of ours?”

Then, with the clarity of a sweet spring afternoon: “When?”

“The letter did not state,” Jon said darkly.

“He could march on our doors at any time,” cried a man at the very back. Older than the rest, deep creases were cut into his skin, but they weren’t sage lines wrinkling his eyes or cuffing his lips.

“Like right fucking now,” another seethed, his beard long and mane longer. He whisked his audience and espoused, “We don’t need this aggravation! It is not our responsibility to shield a runaway princess. No matter who she called Father."

Jeers rose through the crowd, pumping their fists and convening at his back. But a straggle few backed away from the discourse, one tearing a hand through his hair and the others collapsing at their tables.

Edd clattered to his feet. “It is! Remembers your oaths. ‘I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold. The light that brings the dawn. The horn that wakes the sleepers. The shield that guards the realm’, he recited. Looked to Jon to join in, but he remained resolutely silent, refusing to reenroll in a vow he was pardoned from.

The rebel rouser pointed an accusing finger at him. “I’ll not protect a traitor and his family!”

The argument prevailed, but a steward stole Sansa’s attention, slipping past Lady Melisandre and veering directly to the high table. He twirled a scroll in his hand, the parchment wet in patches and the ink bleeding through. Instead of forwarding it to Jon, the boy held it out to her. “For you, my lady.”

Sansa nodded her thanks, voice hoarse from the lump gathering in her throat.

A kraken’s tentacles climbed up the wax seal, flicking off in wayward points. The Greyjoy coat of arms. From the land of Pyke on the Iron Islands. Sansa’s heart leapt for the first time in days, allowed her to finally swallow past the welling hurt incurred by these men. She broke the seal and unrolled the parchment in her lap, aware of Jon peeking over her shoulder.

To Lady Sansa Stark, a true daughter of the north, it read in perfect script.
Balon Greyjoy is dead and the Kingsmoot has chosen me to succeed him. In near the same hour my brother returned to our home. He’s informed me of the trust and kindness you bestowed on him. And of your want for revenge. We share the same desire, you and I, Sansa Stark. I for the disfigurement he inflicted on Theon and you for the torture he ruined you with. Men think we’re so easily ruined, don’t they? But they don’t know we rise from the ashes, from the mud. They don’t know how we can ruin them back.

I thus pledge my support and the Iron Fleet to you, Sansa Stark, if ever you find yourself in need of a particular ruin.

Yara Greyjoy,
Queen of the Iron Isles

Sansa’s breath hitched. Eyes read it again. And again. And again.

Yara Greyjoy. The Iron Fleet. The Ironborn. She wondered if they’d be enough, if they’d tip the scale just a stitch in her and Jon’s favor. Of course, she knew of the Greyjoy Rebellion that tore Theon’s family asunder and landed him in Winterfell and she knew every other attempt at conquering the mainland resulted in a similar disaster.

But to have possession of the sea… From Pyke to White Harbor, if she could barricade the borders and… surround Ramsay’s forces… What that pos—

“Sansa?"

“It’s from the Iron Isles,” she whispered, stabilized her voice at a hush as not to catch the attention of the riled horde. She passed the letter under the table. “Yara Greyjoy has pledged her armada to me.”

Jon unrolled the letter and spread it across his thighs to read. His head jerked up at the end.

Sansa was already on her feet.

“We’re going to overthrow Ramsay Bolton,” she broadcasted, nails digging into the table’s wood. Jon grasped a fistful of her cloak, urging her to sit back down, to not add fuel to the fire and escalate the situation, but she gave no mind to it. Ignored him as she ignored the fucking mad girl comment someone mumbled. “He has imprisoned our brother and—"

A man with claw marks slashed across his face, an exhausted slump to his shoulders, said, “Means nothing to us, my lady. The Night’s Watch doesn’t choose sides.”

All her life Sansa’s mother taught her to rehearse something in her head until it sounded polite enough to say aloud. To never speak without filtering it first or on first impulse or in the high of emotion. She’d carried the lesson with her to King’s Landing’s sun and the high towers of the Vale. But it never accomplished anything, did it? Men sneered at courtesy and didn’t react to it accordingly or equally.

Likewise with the interloper possessing her home, these men were not polite.

So neither would Sansa.

“I understand your hesitance,” she pacified. “History glorifies wars and the men who fight in them, but nowhere are the stories of the men and women and children who die and have their lives taken away to pay for the mistakes of the wealthy and privileged. I’m not asking you to choose. I don’t expect any of you to fight for me. From what Jon’s told me, I don’t expect you to fight for him either.
“So fight for the families you left. For your brothers here. For your life and any life you don’t want taken away. Because if Ramsay Bolton defeats Castle Black there won’t be anyone to guard the Wall. It will be left vulnerable to the White Walker’s breach. If that happens then these frays won’t have mattered anyway. Because we’ll all be too dead to remember why we were fighting in the first place.”

The men sponged up her words, and for one moment Sansa breathed in a little hope. Jon fed her the stories of how everyone arrived on the Wall, how they either voluntarily became a ranger or as punishment for a crime sentenced them to the Wall as an act of reform.

Every man was different – thievery, murder, pillaging, more brutal things Sansa would never admit to knowing existed once but now knew all too well – but in that moment she had one thought about all of them: had they truly reached the summit of their ambitions?

The horde looked to their malcontent leader, so outspoken before and now studied Sansa through narrowed slits. “I say we put it to a vote,” he proposed. The men at his back shot their voices in agreement. “Without her and her beastly knight present.”

Jon’s hand fell from Sansa’s cloak, and Sansa’s gaze fell to the floor.

Meeting adjourned, she hid the Greyjoy letter in her cloak and bowed to the room, took her leave as swiftly as these men dismissed her. Their silence chipped away at her back, at her spine she ironed tall, buffeted only slightly by Brienne following her out.

Ghost sprang up from where Jon assigned him, and Sansa scratched him behind the ear in greeting. He licked her hand. “Shall we return your quarters, Lady Sansa?” Brienne offered.

“I will,” Sansa said, “but I’d like for you to stay and keep an eye on Jon. Please.”

Brienne opened her mouth to argue, but thought better of it and nodded. Any danger lurking within the castle at the hand of its wardens was curbed, at least for now, with the plebiscite taking place in the common hall. Safer still with Ghost, trotting ahead of her, steering a path to Jon’s room.

The men and their din faded behind her the further they went, turned corner after corner until they were alone with the wind’s whistling chasing through the castle. Snow collected in the training yard, unsullied with not a dance of the feet to scuff. The Flint Barracks were emptied for the day, the armament without the crashing of swords, wooden or otherwise.

It was nice to not despair about who came around the corner.

Quite nice.

“Lady Sansa.”

Or it was.

Sansa hadn’t heard the Red Woman – a deplorable sobriquet, but amiable, her long burgundy robes and blood waves supplementing the name – follow her from the common hall, but the snow padded even her footsteps and Ghost’s clicking nails. She turned daintily, as to not catch a slip of ice, and postured herself regally, hands in her lap. The Red Woman smirked and edged closer.

“Lady Melisandre,” Sansa bid in return, slipping into her second skin of the court. “Jon told me what you did for him. I want to thank you. A great number of my family has been taken from me, so I am eternally indebted to you for giving him back.”
The Red Woman bobbed a lingering curtsey. “I was in a crisis of faith at the time of your brother’s murder. His resurrection brought me back to the light. I owe him my life’s service.”

Her voice was lilting, seductive, and of course it was. It felled many great men, as did her beauty, which got her everywhere in the world. Sansa forced a smile.

Canting her head, Lady Melisandre stepped closer and closer. Then, leisurely, like a lioness prowling the tall grass, she circled Sansa as she spoke. “That was quite the rousing speech you made.”

“Thank you. Unfortunately, I don’t think it worked,” Sansa demurred.

“Perhaps not on everyone,” Lady Melisandre agreed. “But there exist those who are open to your crusade. Those who might, in fact, share your ambition.”

Sansa watched the woman swing around her back. “Are there? Will you join our crusade?”

“I go where the prince goes.”

“The prince?” She furrowed her brow, per – oh, right. The missing ingredient to Jon’s resurrection tale, the one that foretold him. Riddled by fanatics who staked their religion on a tangible savior, this woman purported Jon to be the prince that was promised and that he’d soon merge with his destiny. “Jon cautioned me you’d bring up such theories.”

“Did he?” Lady Melisandre sounded almost blithe. “He wasn’t well versed in the prophecy. Do you know it?” Sansa held her tongue. “You do know it, but you do not believe.”

She canted her head, twisting her body to turn with the woman. “That a single person in the whole of the realm will be our savior?”

“Have you not seen the bleeding star in the sky that heralds him?”

“I have,” Sansa said. “I’ve also heard it means many things. One man said it was the blood of my father. Another said it was a sign of my brother’s triumph. Or an omen of the Lannisters. I confess I don’t know which to believe, for none of them resulted true.”

She stepped calculatingly towards Lady Melisandre, powdering her boot in snow. “Regardless of what a comet means or what Jon’s return from the dead means, I do believe one thing. I believe my destiny and my future are mine. Jon’s destiny and Jon’s future are his. Winter has come and we all have a part to play in the long night.”

Lady Melisandre wouldn’t be cowed, smirked and hummed like a snake’s hiss. “Your part takes you home,” she said, “but his sends him further.”

“Then count on me to be with him. Wherever it is he goes,” Sansa boasted. “There is one fault with your prophecy, Lady Melisandre.”

“And what is that, Lady Sansa?”

“Jon is of wolf blood. Not the dragon.”

The Red Woman paused, but not an inch of her relented. Her smirk advanced and she matched their toes and when she tuck a lock of Sansa’s hair behind her ear, a dreadful cold – more frigid than a Lannister, than a Frey, than a Bolton – soaked Sansa. “What makes you so sure?”
"You've changed," Jon remarked.

"Wars and the wars between them alter everyone."

"I'll not complain. You were worth coming back for."

They were neither fair nor unanimous, but they were conclusive. Before, younger and watching Father read the decree that executed a man or woman for thieving or deserting or rebelling against the monarchy, Jon thought nothing could make him want to separate a man from his head. Then the Night’s Watch taught him he had to, no matter the distaste it left in his mouth.

These men didn’t have to, but they wanted to, and they did it so easily.

A scant few disagreed with the mandate, wanted to join the brewing fray, and to those men Jon shook their heads, told them in a hush when and where if they meant their words true. He stomped out of the common hall a disowned man, before the first cheer rang. It didn’t stop their echoes from trailing him, taunting him all the way to his solar.

To Sansa, nomadic again.

Homeless again.

Shame coated his insides; he couldn’t even provide that much for her.

Jon found her stationed at the hearth, firelight dancing prettily across her face, illuminating the clouds of her every breath. Longclaw lay across her lap, needle indented firmly. She’d been at it for days, near to the day after she arrived, and it took Jon much too long to realize she’d decided on Winterfell before she walked through his doors. That it was why she unified them, why she dressed his cloak and brigandine and scabbards and whatever else she could get her hands without his noticing (though of course he noticed; since her bravery in the face of Ramsay’s letter he feared he’d never unsee her for as long as he lived).

The creaking door signaled his return, prompted her to ask, “What did they decide?”

“They voted us out. We leave at first light,” Jon informed her, occupying the companion stool. Like them everywhere else, they brushed so close together Sansa’s elbow grazed his arm as she carved.
Another wolf, he saw, scraping its eye. “A few men were hesitant to agree so I offered them a place in our party.”

“They’d be tried for desertion, wouldn’t they?”

Jon nodded. “But as you said, if we lose it won’t matter anyway.” Lip caught between her teeth, Sansa looked at him, hand stilled but instrument pressured hard into the leather. She needed a knife, a real one, not a twig likely to snap from the exertion. “Besides,” he said, “they’re chickens who won’t hatch. They’ll never leave with us.”

Her brows drew. “How will we receive responses from the houses?”

“Edd promised to forward them. The free folk harvested Mole’s Town as an outpost not long ago. There’s space enough for us to wait for our next movement.”

“They’ll let us stay with them?”

“Suppose we’ll find out. Tormund’s already gone to engender cooperation with your Dreadfort plan.”

She nodded, and Jon wondered how Tormund explained her and her cockamamie plan. What he called her and what tall tales he chose to embellish her escape with. If ‘stole’ worked its way in. If the clans surmised Jon stole Sansa from their enemy. Had he – and Gods, he wished he had – it wouldn’t’ve been a traditional stealing, might not have even qualified for as little struggle as Sansa would’ve put up.

But the idea of purloining Sansa, it pleased him. Not because he’d earn respect amongst the men in the community – he would – or because Ramsay believed him capable enough for it to be true – it wasn’t – but because Sansa being at all his, in any other way, thrilled him.

(It should’ve repulsed him.

But it didn’t.

She was a warrior in the making, steel forged in soft silk, and Jon begged to know how he missed it.)

Steepling his fingers, Jon inspected his scabbard. The wolf’s snout finished and gnashing its teeth, she moved on to its pined ears and scalloped neck, a lifetime of practice fashioning impeccable work.

“It was a good speech, Sansa,” he commended.

He damned her little snort for being so adorable. “Lady Melisandre said the same,” she grumped, “but it didn’t help any, did it?”

Jon’s jaw clenched. “When did you speak with the Red Woman?”

“She followed me out of the common hall. I suspect she means to separate us,” Sansa noted. “Something about fulfilling your destiny.”

Squeezing his eyes shut, Jon cursed the woman, she who did nothing but curse those around her. A lashing welled up on his tongue, a mislike like he’d felt only a handful of times blasting his chest. No, not a handful, he realized, but a few he counted on one hand. Ramsay was the most recent induction and the Lannister pride the oldest, but this had to be the most pungent.

Because she was inescapable? If Sansa weren’t watching him expectantly he’d ambush the woman in her bedchambers. Sever her serpent tongue, halt her zealotry from infecting anyone else. She’d
ensnared Davos already. Shockingly, Brienne told Jon what became of Stannis’ daughter, a girl covered in greyscale but he remembered as far lovelier than most despite it. That Melisandre so righteously burned a pillar of kindness in pious to a god staggered any trust she hoped he’d bestow on her.

It further flummoxed Jon that Davos agreed with Melisandre’s logic, that he rightly set himself up next to a woman who sacrificed the girl he loved so dearly.

Or perhaps he didn’t know what became of her. They walked her ghost on eggshells around him, after all.

“The prince that was promised?” Jon gauged. Sansa need not answer for her silence was confirmation enough. Leaning back on the stool, Jon rubbed his face red, tearing at his beard. “When will they give it a rest?”

“They?” Sansa chirped.

“Ser Davos spouts it too. You’d assume a former smuggler who’s seen the worst of the world would be too cynical to believe in her bullshit.”

She shrugged. “Mayhaps it’s people like him who need to believe the most.”

Throwing a leg, Jon swiveled around and straddled the stool, grasping the board between his legs like a saddle’s pommel. “Do you believe her prophecy? Do you actually believe I’m the prince that was promised or that I’m Azor Ahai reborn? That Longclaw is Lightbringer?”

“No,” Sansa answered, cadence confident, but lined in something else. Something like caution. Something like the glass of hope. “The concept that there’s one chosen person to save us all is utter lunacy, but religion is a freedom.” She paused carving, stared into the fire as it climbed up the stones. A trail of paw prints walked through the ashes blanketing the floor, scuttling into the depths beyond the fire’s glow. “We know the world is a terrible place, but it’s ours. And I’m not saying we have to save all of it, but if it makes someone feel better to believe they’ll be saved from the White Walkers or the wights or whoever, who am I to call them mad? Who are you?”

Not yours, Jon thought. If the prophecy was true he’d belong not to one place or one person but to everywhere and everyone. The thought overwhelmed him, and he swallowed it down deep. Such things didn’t happen. And certainly not to a nobleman’s bastard; they were a lowborn class for a reason.

“Besides, I wouldn’t dismiss Lady Melisandre so quickly,” Sansa advised, resuming her tooling. “From the talks of her she sounds as though she’ll do anything for you. She might prove useful.”

Jon almost scoffed. “What exactly did she say to you?”

“I said we all have a part to play in the long night to come and she countered my part sends me home, but yours sends you farther.” Sansa glanced sideways at him. “I told her I’m with you wherever you choose to go.”

Following her arrival Jon fretted endlessly about whether she wanted anything to do with him. He was her brother, sure, but a half one at that. He wasn’t Robb who embodied a gallant prince, especially where his sisters were concerned, until his end; nor Bran, fearless and peculiarly omnipotent, who helped her raise Lady the most; nor Rickon, the baby of the family and thus the sweetest, a perfect match to her saccharine temperament.

He didn’t serve a role in their younger years, so hearing her now, hearing her want him past retaking
Winterfell, past revenge on Ramsay, past saving Rickon, hearing she wanted to go with him wherever life took them…

He reached a hand out to her and smiling, she twined her fingers in his. Were he bold, were they different and it proper, he’d bring that hand to his mouth and kiss those fingers. Those that claimed him a part of her, a Stark. “And I’m with you wherever you choose to go,” he proclaimed.

The smile bloomed higher on Sansa’s cheeks. She swung their hands between them like he remembered watching her and Arya do, humming and skipping through the corridors Arya’s short legs couldn’t keep pace with. “To the end.”

“To the end,” Jon agreed.

“Good. But until then I do need my hand back if I’m to finish this by tomorrow.”

Laughing, he planted a kiss between her eyes and jumped up, the stool rocking from the sudden spring. “I’d like a second look at the Greyjoy letter. Where’d you put it?” he hunted.

Sansa directed him to the desk where two craggy arrowheads acted as paperweights, posted at the top and the bottom of the scroll. The corners curled in, and Jon flicked the arrowheads aside, watched as the parchment rolled back to its natural formation. “We didn’t send a letter to Pyke,” he stated.

“No, but you read the letter,” Sansa said. “Theon made it home and now his sister wants revenge for what Ramsay did to him. Whether it was her decision to come to our aid or whether Theon persuaded her, does it matter as long as we have their support?”

“The Ironborn have never wanted anything to do with us before,” Jon objected. “So why now?”

(“He’s afraid of you,” she said that first night, the moon shining through the clouds and the fire deteriorated to nothing, they’d sat there so long.

It bothered Jon for hours after, well into the next day. He couldn’t reconcile the boy he grew up with – trained with, ate with, laughed with, hunted with, as much of an outsider in the Stark home as he was – with the man who feared him.

“He’s afraid you’ll kill him for betraying Robb and burning Bran and Rickon, but he didn’t burn them. He told everyone he did and killed two farm boys instead. Bran and Rickon are alive.”

“I know.”)

“Theon wanted to make amends with our family for what he did,” Sansa said. “Mayhaps this is his way of doing that.”

Jon hummed, wasn’t as swayed by the missive and the armada sailing over its promises. Drumming his fingers on the table, he read it over again, obsessed on every word the same way Sansa did Ramsay’s threats until he shuttered it relieve her of its haunting. Both letters avowed revenge, but neither conceived deadlines. An unsettled feeling dropped into Jon’s gut.

In the distance a horn trumpeted into the air. Sansa looked up from her carving, looked between the door and Jon and back again, lips parting. The horn heralded her arrival, announced the rider come with Ramsay’s letter. Who else had come to their door?

“It is good news,” Jon grudgingly admitted, carrying himself to the window, “but what use do we have for a fleet of ships? We need fighters on land, not in the sea.”
“The Iron Isles are islands, Jon.” Sansa scalped a scale in the wolf’s neck, worrying her work to an almost feverish speed. “They do fight on land.”

“Not adequately. Think of all the rebellions the Greyjoy family have waged on mainland territories. They were defeated every time, retreated back onto said islands where no one gives them any mind —”

“Precisely!” she exclaimed. “Ramsay won’t expect them.”

Jon harrumphed. “They might be valuable allies to have once we’ve retaken the north, but…I don’t see how we’d benefit from their assistance.”

A cacophony of voices bashed the courtyard, and Jon leaned in closer, forehead touching the frigid glass. Despite being the Lord Commander’s quarters, his vantage point of the castle was a poor one, saw the bailey but not much of it. A horse cantered into view, tossing its head and flicking its tail in agitation as the man on its back steered the horse in a circle around the men. Men who gave the stranger a considerably wide berth.

Behind Jon Sansa observed, “You’re being stubborn. Just like Father,” but he didn’t acknowledge her, wiped the glass clean of steam. He squinted, tried to configure the man’s identity below the hood drawn over his head. Not even a shield bearing a coat of arms adorned his back. Jon’s gaze flickered to the ramparts where the archers were at the ready, arrows nocked on the string.

Suddenly Podrick sprinted across the courtyard, up the main staircase, and disappeared into a corridor. Not seconds later, Jon heard his thundering footfall, louder and louder. Jon met him at the door, sweeping past Sansa quick to her feet.

Jon yanked the door open and Podrick flinched, his fist poised to knock. “Who is it?”

“Petyr Baelish has been detained at the gates,” the young man announced. “He’s asked for an audience with Lady Sansa.”

“Did he?” Jon growled.

“Yes, my lord.”

Lord Baelish resided somewhere on that list of his – maybe at the tip top, the prime spot for the genesis of the doomed Stark clan, instigating their misfortunes for his personal gain if Sansa’s anecdotes and eavesdropping were to be believed. And Jon believed her. He had no reason not to. And it certainly gave him more reason to hate the man with too much passion.

Sansa marched across the room, her grip tightening on Longclaw and the cross guard poking Jon’s leg as she brushed past him and into the corridor. He called her name, pushed Podrick aside before he could hop. She ignored him, skirt breezing around her legs as she turned a corner, and he tried again, reaching out to grab her.

His fingers wrapped around her arm. “Sansa.”

“No!” she cried, and wrenched free. He released her and raised his arms in surrender, in no harm. “I need to see him, Jon!”

“You don’t. I don’t want him near you ever again.”

“I don’t want him near you either.”
In that second, Sansa’s ire perfectly uncontested, not enough ice in the world to simmer her veins, Jon fell in love.

With the strength in her shoulders and every brave step forward. With the fire animating her. With her, may the gods damn him for it.

Life beat her, broke her, changed her hair and her name and cowed her placid with men who did the beating and the breaking. Life dealt her a hand it didn’t foresee the consequences of until it was too late. Until she rose from the ashes the ashes of her shambled daydreams.

Because the pack survives and the north remembers, and if life wanted to stack so much on her chest that she’d suffocate it shouldn’t have stalked into a wolf’s den singing with bloodlust.

Because the legends were true; Starks were hard to kill.

Jon unsheathed Longclaw in one graceful sweep, prying the scabbard from Sansa and tossing it behind him. The steel glinted, sparked to life. “I’ll go,” Jon volunteered. “You stay here.”

Sansa shook her head. “I need to see his eyes when I tell him what Ramsay did. I need to see him break when I show him what Ramsay did. I need to see his guilt when I ask if he knew about the man he gave me to,” she lamented, not a hint of quake in her voice. “And then I want to look down on him when I tell him he’ll never see me again.”

How could he deny her? The knives in their backs were still bleeding. And if there were seven hells and each were lorded over by its own devil, how could he deny the opportunity to face down own of her devils in her home territory?

“You have changed,” Jon remarked.

“Wars and the wars between them alter everyone.”

“I’ll not complain. You were worth coming back for.” He glanced back at Podrick, hugging the scabbard to his chest, and sighed. “Let’s not keep him waiting, then.”

Jon never had the pleasure (displeasure) of meeting Petyr Baelish so far in his life, only wove an image in his mind from Lady Stark’s blithe childhood adventures and Sansa’s more grave ones, but in that formulation the man was pointy and ratty and as diminutive as his name belied. The slender yet tall man who dismounted and dropped his hood didn’t at all match said image.

Draped in a black mantle fixed at the collar by a gold mockingbird pin, Lord Baelish’s trimmed gray goatee stretched as Jon and Sansa received him halfway across the courtyard. He pinched his leather gloves at the fingertips and the hands that came free were decorated in gold rings.

Inlaid with sapphires, crusted in emeralds, and ablaze with rubies, the eyes of the yard salivated on those rings, single-mindedly calculating how far and how fast just one of those could get them. But Lord Baelish either didn’t notice or didn’t care; from the royal way the man presented himself, Jon suspected the latter. This far north, however, his pride in his appearance bordered dangerously on decadence, and men had been killed for much less.

A sly smile racked Sansa up and down. He bowed his head to her, a token of respect seeking a like. “Lady Sansa, you have no idea how happy I am to see you unharmed.”

“Unharmed?” Sansa sputtered.

“When I heard you escaped Winterfell I feared the worst,” Lord Baelish hastily clarified. “But I see
your beauty is unblemished.”

Sansa bristled, tucking her scrunched hands underneath her sleeves. “I’m not as unblemished as you’d like to think. Ramsay needed to keep my face pretty, but the rest could be hidden.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Are you?”

Jon angled a shoulder in front of her. The slight interference flitted Lord Baelish’s eyes to him, smirk pulling harder on the wires. “I don’t believe we’ve been formerly introduced,” he said and extended his hand palm-down to Jon, who stared at it, uninterested. “Petyr Baelish, Lord Paramount of the Vale and Lord of Harrenhal. I’m certain Sansa’s spoken of me.”

“She has,” Jon responded curtly, absorbing Sansa’s malice into his own. His own hand. He raised Longclaw to Lord Baelish’s throat, tip aimed at the man’s Adam’s apple, bobbing worriedly. “So tell me why I shouldn’t order you executed where you stand.”

Lord Baelish gaped down the sword’s long line, flashed a pleading look to Sansa. But she thrust her chin up higher, not a hand to stay Jon’s or a word for rescue. A rejection if he should ever recognize one. Swiftly, he replaced that brief break in his countenance, there then gone and an even smirk slipped flawlessly into place. “Such a temper,” he tsked.

“I’d answer him if I were you,” Sansa warned.

Boots crunched on the snow as the gathered crowd pressed in closer. Their allegiance, though phantom, though deteriorated and not likely to erect again, affirmed Jon’s grip. They warmed his back and he silently sang his gratitude. They may be disillusioned with him, but at least he knew that if this man and whatever army the archers were trained on outside ended their conversation in bloodshed his former brotherhood wouldn’t abide by it sitting down.

Lord Baelish ran a hand through the gray flecking his temple. “Might we go somewhere warmer? More private?”

“No,” Jon said, stepped forward and scratched the blade against his flesh. “Again I ask, what’s to stop me from putting this through your neck?”

“What are the crimes I’m worth executing for?” the man sneered.

“Take your pick.”

Sansa stepped around Jon, brushing his shoulder, and said, “How many murders have you had a hand in committing?”

“Being a co-conspirator is not the same as delivering the final blow,” Lord Baelish argued.

“No, but your hand is still on the blade.”

She inched forward, paused at Jon’s elbow and the sharp take of her name from his lips. “It’s alright,” Sansa appeased. “Keep your sword on him, he won’t dare touch me. He won’t risk getting nicked.” To Lord Baelish and another step forward, she said, “How many of your machinations do you think I remember you confessing to my ear in your carriage?” And forward, clipping her arm on the cross guard. “You persuaded my Aunt Lysa to poison Jon Arryn, which elected my father Hand of the King where he, too, was killed.” And forward, skimming Longclaw’s strong. “You conspired with Olenna Tyrell to kill Joffrey and then you gave me the necklace containing the poison.” And
forward. Halted short at the sword’s weak. Just out of Baelish’s reach. For now and into forever. “And then you stole me from King’s Landing and sold me to a monster.”

“Halted short at the sword’s weak. Just out of Baelish’s reach. For now and into forever.”

“Their blood does not stain my hands,” Lord Baelish argued.

“No,” Sansa agreed. “You drench other people in your crimes so you can’t be convicted and knock off your enemies’ heads to look taller.”

“Has that made you hate me?”

She canted her head. Said, “I don’t hate you, Lord Baelish.”

It was too tenuous a word, too small, closed inside the four walls of a box without room to distend or a window capable of anything else. Lord Baelish, realizing none of this, not reading her expression, exhaled too soon. The relieved little sound birthed a smile prettier than his words and probably as charming, too. Jon’s insides crawled, from his gut into his chest and out his arm that didn’t falter even a tinge.

Dancing her fingertips along Longclaw’s fuller, its steel borrowing her voice, Sansa corrected, “I loathe you. I revile you. Nothing would please me more than to see you cut down in your greatest moment of victory.”

“I understand,” Lord Baelish said. “I pray what I have to offer you can compensate for your hatred and that you may forgive—”

“Nothing will ever make me forgive you,” Sansa snapped. “If that was your purpose in coming here you’ve wasted your time on a fool’s errand. I never want to see you again.”

Lord Baelish opened his mouth, but for once nothing floated out. He meekly mustered her name on a breath, flexed and cracked his fingers, a slave to the want of her. He itched for her. For her red hair and her Tully blues and her skin he mistook for the great love who never loved him back and he’d never get this one to love him either. And when he did reach for her she jerked away, Jon switching sword hands and hoicking her by her cloak, kicking up snow in their haste.

Having caught only a wisp of her, Lord Baelish’s hand fell back to his side. “I always intended to come back for you,” he swore after a moment.

“But you didn’t.”

“I have now. And with an army,” he stated. His chest puffed once more, he carried on, recent infraction forgotten. “Young Robin Arryn has been training at Runestone under Lord Royce’s tutelage for some time. The Knights of the Vale are encamped at Moat Cailin and both parties are willing to deploy them to support your campaign.”

“Yara Greyjoy was destined by the Kingsmoot and has succeeded her father on the Salt Throne,” Sansa informed him. “She’s pledged the Iron Fleet to me. So, you see, we have an army and are in no need of yours.”

“I would not take up Queen Greyjoy’s offer,” Lord Baelish advised. “The ironborn are unmatched in naval warfare, it’s true, but they’re poor soldiers on land. I can provide you with eighteen thousand men.”

Jon froze. Stunned to stillness. His soles sank in the snow, to the mud beneath, but he didn’t notice, eighteen thousand ringing loud in his ear.
Eighteen thousand, he mused. *Eighteen thousand*. That’d be enough. More than enough. More than Ramsay’s army by a good baker’s dozen. That bastard’s forces would look puny in comparison, especially if Lord Royce assisted in commanding them. The Knights of the Vale were legendary, their lord commander even more so. And they’d be undiluted by fish legs, another component superior to House Greyjoy’s newly-minted faith.

Jon slowly lowered Longclaw. “Can you guarantee us that number?”

“We’re not interested,” Sansa decided, more to him than to Lord Baelish. She grabbed Jon’s arm and rattled him, tried to shake the nonsense muddying his mind into negotiating with a man he called turncloak and puppeteer. “Jon, we’re not interested.”

“Are you so sure?” Lord Baelish tempted. “Kindness. Generosity. These are fleeting characteristics, and once they’re gone they rarely return.”

Sansa crushed Jon’s arm, nails cutting crescents into his brigandine. Swished her skirt as she tried to drag him off, away, back to their room and into sensibility. He wasn’t lenient, however, rooted his feet in the ground. “Lend us a few days to reply,” he said.

Lord Baelish nodded, and Sansa glared at him, another tug on Jon’s arm insisting him the other way. Neither party were privy on turning their back on their other, shuffled backward until Jon and Sansa were in the shadows of the underpass to the stables and Lord Baelish at his horse. Mounted, he wheeled the horse around and with a spur to its side, charged through the open gates, rejoining the four-man escort patient on the other side, Arryn falcon soaring over their heads.

Biting the inside of her lip, Sansa held her tongue until the horses thundering hooves faded in the distance. Jon’s shoulders slumped, as if he knew the barrage about to hit him now she’d concealed them out of sight, out of earshot.

She didn’t disappoint. “What are you doing? House Greyjoy—”

“Has a hundred war vessels,” Jon finished, turning to her. “And it’s a mighty gamble they even have that. I’d much rather rely on their forces than take Lord Baelish’s offer, trust me, but if you want to wage a war against a Bolton – if we want our brother back, we can’t do this alone.”

Sansa crossed her arms, defiant and stubborn, and for just a moment Jon saw Arya standing in front of him. It was the first time he’d thought of her since Sansa found and that disheartened him, so preoccupied with what was to come that she’d strayed too far and been forgotten.

“I don’t like this,” Sansa muttered, staring down at her shoes. On the well-trodden path, her toe vanished in the mud.

“I don’t either,” Jon echoed. “But we have to save Rickon. We have to take Winterfell. If we take Winterfell Bran will come home. If we take Winterfell Arya will come home.”

She nodded ferociously. “We take Winterfell. We get our family back. Whatever the cost.”

Turned out Jon was right not to hedge his bets on the man who raised their objections.

Because, come next morning, no one save Edd came to see them off.

Dawn still below the horizon, the pale sky cast an almost sickly blue on the yard, on the row of horses getting the last of their saddle bags loaded. Davos and Brienne were mounted, a few words of
small talk grudged between them while the party waited for Melisandre, the last to leave her quarters.

Jon’s black colt nipped at Sansa’s white mare, tossed his head and whinnied loudly at the unreciprocated play. The mare answered in kind, whipping her tail at him.

Stroking her horse’s cheek, Sansa laugh. “Not a match made in heaven, is it?” she commented. The mare made a great show of nodding, shaking her reins about while Sansa cooed at her. She nibbled on the crown braid Sansa plaited the night before, thick lips catching a few fly aways, and Sansa squealed, face pinched.

The musical sound floated to Jon, off to the side with Edd and fitting gloves on his hands. “You best take care of that one,” Edd told him, both watching as Sansa put herself between the two horses, combing her fingers through the colt’s mane.

“I will,” Jon assured. “You sure you won’t come with us?”

Edd smiled still and proclaimed he was sure for the umpteenth time. They’d butted heads on the point before – many times, actually – and though Jon gave his word he wouldn’t be punished for desertion in these dire times, Edd remained loyal to the Night’s Watch. ‘It shall not end until my death’, the oath espoused, and to that day he would stay.

Jon didn’t fault Edd for it and accepted that his reasons for pestering the point were selfish ones; in truth, he wasn’t ready to say goodbye to the last of his friends. He had Sansa and he had Tormund, but if Winterfell once upon a time was his childhood then Castle Black was his adolescence and where he matured into a man. Whatever came next was an unknown abyss. And he didn’t know if he was ready.

Edd jocularly shoved him. The two fell back together, embracing each other gruffly, and for the first time Jon dwelled on this end. Every time before was light-hearted see you soon and goodbye for now, but when he parted from Edd he’d part from Edd. Because even if he survived this war he knew he’d never come back.

He, Sam, and Edd were the last ones left, the others given their blood and heartbeat for the cause, and Jon hoped he could still say that in a moon’s time, in a year’s or two.

“It was an honor serving with you, Jon.”

“And you, Edd.”

Behind him the clack of boots on floorboards announced Melisandre’s arrival. Wrapping a loose shawl around her head to protect from the raining snow, Melisandre eased down the stairs and to her horse on Davos’ other side, unaware of Jon tracking her. No, he realized, she probably did feel his eyes on her, did feel his swell of irritation at the sight of her. And, hells, she probably relished his attention.

He’d yet to ward her against talking to Sansa again, be it about Azor Ahai or Jon or really anything at all. Now was as good a time as any to threaten her from trying to influence Sansa lest she want to answer to him.

Withdrawing from the hug, Jon cleared his throat. “If any of these bastards get past us…”

“They won’t make it any further,” Edd promised and clapped him on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

Jon nodded his thanks then called, “Rider’s up!”
Beyond the gates, Ghost roamed out in the open, his pure coat blending into the white landscape, but his head perked up at the shout, two red eyes aglow in the distance. Jon whistled for him, and the direwolf ran back inside, panting but happily so. He sniffed Sansa’s shoes and around her mare, mindful of the horses trying to stomp on him.

Melisandre had one foot in the stirrup when Jon came up behind her. He bowed his head in close to quiet from anyone else overhearing, but his voice was as icy as the weather she shielded herself from. “I am allowing you to travel with us, but know you are walking a very fine line with me. If I hear from Sansa or from anyone else that you’ve poisoned her with your talk I won’t hesitate to leave you alone in this world.”

She practically keened. “My prince,” she moaned, “poison is used to silence your enemies from revealing something true. Silence was never my motivation.”

With that Melisandre swung herself into the saddle, collecting her reins in one hand. “What in the seven hells does that mean?” Jon hissed.

“‘The Lord of Light will reveal all in due time, my prince.’”

Cursed woman, mad woman, he seethed. Scowling, Jon tramped past the others to his horse. Ignoring Sansa’s soft inquiry of his name, he tied Longclaw to his saddle bag and shooed Ghost on ahead. Sansa tried again – what was that, what were you talking about – to the same result, finally huffed like he hoped to defer her to. She didn’t need to be on the wrong end of his irritation with the Red Woman, better for her that she didn’t know.

Jon tapped his horse’s side and the colt leapt into action, leading the party through the gates and onto the unyielding terrain at a brisk canter.

Chapter End Notes

Baelish is back and Jon wants to use his men, but will that change when other houses arrive to aid them?
stay conscious through the madness & chaos

Chapter Summary

"You're not a southerner," she refuted. "The Lannisters are southerners. The Tyrells are southerners."

"To the free folk we're all southerners. We're all the same," Jon said. "And now I've asked them to sacrifice their lives for our war. How does that make me any different?"

Chapter Notes

So, I lied. That one long chapter I was talking about is going to be too long, so I'm breaking it down into three slightly-smaller chapters. Also, some book facts will not be blended in.

On a side note, who else is totally terrified of tomorrow night's episode?

The first few days were…an adjustment, to say the least.

It amazed Sansa that Jon ever traveled like this, lived like this, and liked it so. Trying to muffle her first instinct to wrinkle her nose, she ate their gruel and wore their pelts and watched her every step, not just careful of the piles of horse manure absolutely everywhere but of the discomfit eyes lingering on her.

The extant wildlings consisted of hundreds of clans, she learned, led by hundreds of lords, chieftains, whatever they preferred themselves callously termed, and the abound collective tramped the earth down to mud. Sansa wandered through the field of tents and teepees and open fire pits holding her heavy skirts, once lost a mired shoe and found her hands and legs and face splotched red and brown by the time she freed herself. She furiously whipped at her hands, smeared the mud more than cleaned it off, and then she heard snickering off to the right, looked up and saw three wildling men watching her for amusement.

She kept any discomfort to the tent she shared with Jon after that.

Gods, she moaned and groaned. She felt as much an outsider on their land as Jon felt a crow from the sounds of his involved stories, just another vain southerner fussing on her dresses and far too offended by dirt. How silly she probably looked to the women she marveled at from afar. Where she was pristine they were wild, as scraggily-haired as their men. Where she was collected they were free, by their own definition. A part of Sansa envied them; she could never be any of those things, born and bred for plush.

The worst-for-wear accommodations she’d ever slept amidst was a wobbling carriage, jostled about on an aching back with Arya’s head in her lap, the girl curled up on the deflated cushions. Even Ramsay gave her a room made of stone. Now two tree trunks, scrawny by cloudy skies and
blanched by cold, erected the canopy tent. Pockets of teeth-chattering air no number of braziers could stave off leaked through the cracks in the patched animal skins, rustling up underneath the twin straw pallets bookending the back.

Assembled of a half dozen logs tied together, a table for war counseling divided the room justly, the focal point aiming to be crowded around. Stones rendered in house sigils were scattered to every corner of an unrolled map to distinguish what and how much they were up against exactly; the more stones painted in a house’s sigil the more sizable their army. Like Winterfell. The fortress looked far more imposing on paper.

Jon studied the map late into the night, long after Sansa gave up prying him to bed and extinguished her light. More than once she’d waken to a quiet camp and a high moon and him still standing, his cloak laid atop her sometime while she slept. Her body warmed and relaxed under the wool, she watched him.

*You do too much*, she wanted to tell him. She hated the notch in his forehead and the length of his footprints in the dirt and the way his eyes constantly counted their ranks. Hated his unyielding, infrangible obstinacy to not let her be another sacrifice in his life’s worth of them.

*I’m not going anywhere*, she wanted to promise. Thought about going to him with the pelt dragging behind her, thought about wrapping herself – fur and all – around him. Thought of holding him.

She never did, however.

Jon didn’t need her adding to his irritation.

There was enough of that already. Winterfell’s provisions would last six months with rationing, but the wildlings did not have six months, living off the land as they were. The wind snuffing out every fire they built, any chunk of stone foraged and spared was welded into arrows. Stores of thread and leather dwindled (even Sansa’s), trees were skinned so hunted furs could be sewn to make more clothing.

But nothing can last forever. The hunters began to return empty-handed. The creeks froze. The horses, too.

Then a newborn died in the night. Time couldn’t be spared for waiting any longer. (Thus far only one raven returned in reply, the crossed signature of Lady Lyanna Mormont refusing to break faith with the one true king in the north.)

The woods were calmest in the spring, but it was the dead of winter when the forest floor came to life, and today the trees were alive with fifteen hundred men and women departing for the Dreadfort. “We march in a fortnight,” Jon informed them, stretching on his toes to make eye contact with as many as possible.

A warning, it was. Sansa watched as they shouldered their packs and holstered daggers to their hips and bow and arrows to their backs, and warmth that tasted like hope filled her chest. They might’ve been different from her in too many ways to count, but their loyalty outmatched every northern house, those prone to vendettas and in need of convincing and those that weren’t.

For the first time Sansa was glad to have wildlings on her side.

Duty-bent, the sea of rags migrated as one into the copses without a last glance at the family and children being left behind, clustered on the other side of the hillock. “Don’t be seen,” Tormund commanded a lanky man, older than he and beard dripping down to his chest.
The man nodded, but with his face almost completely vanished under the orange hair fading to white Sansa almost missed the acknowledgement. He stuck his hand out to Jon. “This is the way, King Crow.”

Jon grasped his hand and agreed, “This is the way.” As the wildling merged with the mass exodus he turned to Tormund, ignoring Sansa’s pinched brow wanting to ask on the nickname. “You’re not joining them?” he asked.

“Dim Dalba will do well enough,” Tormund replied. “You died for me, Jon Snow. I’m not gonna leave ya to die again. ‘Sides,”—he crossed his arms and twisted around, scanning the camp, not even a dent emptied but feeling somehow smaller—“you sending away most of our fighters leaves us vulnerable to attack. You’ll need me around to kick some arse.”

“We’ll manage.”

“Didn’t say we wouldn’t. You see that woman?”

Tormund tipped his chin to Brienne, sat around a fire and shining her sword. Head listing, Sansa mashed her lips together. He was caustic and brusque and his words without filter, but his softness for the blonde knight endeared her. Brienne didn’t notice Tormund’s attentions, her heart too full of gold to see how his eyes followed her or how he puffed up when she passed him, but Sansa did, found it sweet nonetheless.

He broke from them, settled himself right on the stump next to Brienne. Her eyes rolled heavenward, reciprocated with only a big grin.

Neither Jon nor Sansa moved until the last wildling shadow was lost in the trees. In a matter of seconds the snow coated the land anew, to the brink that it looked like no one had been there to sully it to begin with. Sansa watched two children chase each other through the camp, past small batches crowded around barely-aflame fire pits and a woman washing her knife in a basin. Past her tent, its flap tied back and revealing Ser Davos bent over the war council table.

Sansa’s feet itched to ferry her there for a premeditated meeting, but Jon lingered and thus, so did she.

He stared wistfully at the forest, at the swaying treetops, his head full of knots. Sansa knew how it tormented him, asking the wildlings to him win a war he didn’t include in their negotiations. Tormund recalled Hardhome for her not long ago, reflected on Jon’s speech to extricate his kind before danger knocked on their door and the massacre that came anyway.

They could’ve refused, but they didn’t. They could’ve buried themselves in the tunnels to wait out the storm underground, but they wouldn’t abandon him. They could’ve turned their backs on him as an indiscreet reprisal, but they followed his plan to outflank Ramsay, another master of genocide.

Sana had no idea how to get that through to Jon.

“King Crow?” she teased, slipping her hand in his and cradling them in her lap.

The corner of Jon’s lips tickled. “Don’t make me to explain.”

“No need. It’s rather self-explanatory, I think.” Sansa pushed her shoulder into his and swayed them slightly side to side, in want of a chuckle or a full smile. But Jon glanced over at her, dissuaded.

“They will come back, Jon.”

He shook his head pejoratively. “They shouldn’t have to do this.”
“They’re doing it for you.”

“You don’t know them, Sansa. I was a kneeler and I promised them if they came with me they’d be safe to farm and settle, and I wouldn’t ask anything of them until the Night King breached the Wall. This wasn’t part of our bargain.”

“It is now.”

“They don’t fight for southroners.”

Sansa dropped Jon’s hand. She skid around to stand in front of him, hands escaping under his cloak and anchoring to his waist. “You’re not a southroner,” she refuted. “The Lannisters are southroners. The Tyrells are southroners.”

“To the free folk we’re all southron. We’re all the same,” Jon said. “And now I’ve asked them to sacrifice their lives for our war. How does that make me any different?”

“Because,” Sansa said, as soft as the hand she placed on his cheek, “we have snow and ice in our blood. Same as the free folk. They know this is their best chance at survival.”

Jon’s eyes closed and when they opened again they were looking past her, over her shoulder to the trees again. To the knots in his conscience where she kept losing him. “I ask too much of them.”

She hooked his chin. “They’ll be rewarded for their bravery when the time comes.”

Ser Davos emerged from the tent, fiddling with a pouch he wore around his neck, usually out of sight until fidgeting took hold. Sansa never outright asked what jangled about in the leather sack, but at one sup she noted four fingers on his right hand were shorter than the other. She formulated a good enough idea of the contents.

His head swiveled this way and that way, searching, Sansa knew, for them. “Come,” she urged Jon. “I see Ser Davos waiting for us.”

The ground quaked from under her. Shuddered again. Again. And again. Vaulted up Sansa’s legs and to the birds gone shrieking into the air. Sansa instinctively ducked as they flew over her and Jon and watched as they dove, squawking and screaming, at the trees. At the still swaying tops. At the trembling earth.

And then a large arm swung at them and another jumped the trees apart, and Sansa didn’t have time to think much on those molten hands before a giant materialized at the southernmost edge of the camp.

It – he, he, mane peeled back on his head and twisted as long as Sansa’s – he was at least fourteen feet tall. Sandor Clegane, a beast of a man who set his attempts at affection on Sansa, looked minuscule in comparison. Even his better brother, Gregor, couldn’t topple a giant.

Said giant bared his yellow teeth, crooked nose smashed onto his face wrinkling, and roared at the birds, the sound a rumble to the earth’s core. Sansa prayed to the gods that Ramsay presumed it thunder, smirked on the coming storm though he had no way of knowing his calamitous error, no way of knowing the thunder had legs and the storm roared for his enemy. If she weren’t so unnerved by the giant, she’d delight in the ease of which he’d squash Ramsay’s infantry.

But she gawked up at him as he past them on his way into the camp, words frozen in her throat, mouth gaping and stuttering for anything to grapple on to. Jon chuckled at her, picked up her hand and tugged her along behind the giant, their little feet dipping and treading in the prints he stamped in
“That’s a giant. That’s a giant,” Sansa exclaimed, a whisper shot in his ear like silly court girls sharing gossip in the gallery.

“I know,” Jon said, his breath hot on her neck. She shivered. “His name is Wun Wun. For short.” She barked out a laugh. “You know his name. Of course you do.”

They walked on in Wun Wun’s shadow, collecting Brienne on the way to the tent. Sansa peered up as the snow lightened, flakes she caught on her finger, falling almost halfheartedly now. It gathered on Wun Wun’s head, crowning him in a halo. She smiled. Didn’t realize Jon had gone quiet, caught up in melancholy again, until he spoke.

“He’s the last of his kind, Sansa,” he said thoughtfully. “Imagine what that feels like.”

She could. They both could. After Mother, after Robb, when Arya evaporated into thin air and her brothers were burned, a hollowness, loneliness, Sansa had only ever heard lamentations about panged into her chest. It felt like dying with them, disembodied and her throat raw and open and desperately wanting to claw off her skin.

But their lives attached greater importance to hers. And the trial of it got her to where she was, in a wildling camp, trailing a giant, armies behind her and a war ahead. Jon’s hand tight in hers. Sad to say Jon rarely warded off her loneliness, rarely entered her mind at all, too full of happier things to survive her. She thought so little of him all the way up here, but now she was never letting go. Proud to be with him. Proud to be his sister.

A gust slammed viciously at their backs, tripping them into the tent. Ser Davos ripped the flaps from their bindings, meant to halt the wind in its tracks, but still the skirts billowed, crawled under Sansa’s cloak. She descended further in the tent, rounding the table to momentarily huddle around a lit brazier. She hadn’t believed the misfortune that supposedly downed Stannis Baratheon’s army, winter’s brutality freezing the half that didn’t run, but living it there and now, she did. It was so maddeningly cold she worried for their fate, worried it’d end the same.

She heard the stones clink behind her. One arm crossed over his chest, Jon juggled two stones etched in a crud Manderly merman while Brienne struggled to tie the flaps together.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me,” Ser Davos said, loud to be heard as the wind cornered them in its howl.

“Ser, we disrespected you by not confiding in your experience before now,” Sansa demurred, detaching from the brazier and taking her place across the table from Jon, to Ser Davos’ left. “You have our thanks, not the other way around.”

He inclined his head considerably. “I have to admit, I was disappointed upon hearing of Lord Bolton’s letter. When you didn’t seek my council I fretted I’d offended you in some way.”

“No, Ser Davos, you did not.” Not even close.

Sansa’s eyes flickered to Jon. Ser Davos called the meeting, but it was Sansa who agreed to it, much to Jon’s consternation. The man and his new religion weren’t yet back in Jon’s trust and he still refused to utilize Ser Davos’ warfare experience and tactical knowledge, much, in turn, to Sansa’s consternation. Her volunteering to lead the meeting was the only way she’d persuaded him to even attend.
Jon closed his fist around the stones. Held his tongue brilliantly; he learned from a wealth of practice, Sansa supposed.

She clasped her hands. “What would you like to discuss first?”

“With all due respect, my lady,” Ser Davos hedged, and Sansa felt him scatter a bed of eggshells in front of her, “it’d be best to leave military precision to your brother and me. I appreciate your kindness, but you and Lady Brienne aren’t required to stay.”

The eggshells crunched under his trepid steps. How infuriating. “I accepted your want for a conference, therefore I deserve a place at this table.”

“Because you’re a Stark?” She nodded. “A woman Stark. Jon and I have experience in these matters and you—”

“Will lean on your guidance as needed,” Sansa finished. “You’ve forgotten I lived with the royal family in King’s Landing. In such a place and in such a position, you tend to hear things.”

Ser Davos’ short-tipped fingers grazed the warped map almost gingerly, like its dried wrinkles would dissolve at even the lightest of pressures. “Hearing a war planned and a war described is not the same as being in a war. You’re a highborn lady. When combat bangs on your door you’re concealed in a tower. You’ve never held a sword or felt blood dry on your hands. You don’t know what it’s like to kill someone.”

“Lady Brienne is a highborn lady as well,” Sansa countered, hated how unsteady her voice was, how she had to grapple for purchase. “Would you say the same to her?”

“Lady Brienne is a knight and reputed one at that,” Ser Davos said, glancing at the woman in question. She tapped Oathkeeper’s hilt. “If you insist on participating in this meeting and guiding negotiations, fine. To purge my curiosity,”—he motioned to the stacks on the map—“some houses have more stones because..?”

“To indicate the size of their army,” Sansa said. “Or the size we suspect.”

“Right,” he grunted.

One by one he rearranged the map, dispensing the stones into a far different image than they first organized, even grabbed a few random items from around to stand in as more. The bulk of the stones went to White Harbor and Winterfell, but for their declaration Kahold and the Last Hearth were stocked with Boltons. Condon merged with Cerwyn. Forrester and Whitehill flew banners for Glover.

Ser Davos tucked one Bolton representative at the Dreadfort and swept the wildling stones (which Tormund gleefully colored as a war horn, though Jon suggested a snow bear to honor some man named Mance Rayder) from Mole’s Town. He instead pointed the wildlings south, lined them up single file like good little soldiers. The outpost left behind looked disastrously, fatally vulnerable to an incursion. Just like Tormund said.

With children too young and elders too old as the main occupants of the camp, how would they defend themselves?

“Have you sent ravens or riders to the houses you mean to recruit?” Sansa heard Ser Davos ask.

She nodded, rattled off to who and when and why, unable to tear her eyes from the map and the giant hole where she resided. It looked so wrong, being so alone in this fight. “We’ve sent another
raven since, to House Glover.”

“To Robett Glover? Saying what?”

How were they supposed to survive an ambush? They were almost entirely cut off from any viable escape. The Last Hearth to their south, nothing but water to the west and ice to the north, the east covered in quarrelsome clansmen behind every rock, they were cornered. Even Queenscrown wouldn’t provide adequate protection or advantage if Ramsay – or anyone, for that matter – decided to march north overnight.

They’d be annihilated before daybreak kissed their face.

Sansa felt the first knife of fear prick her skin.

“Lady Sansa?”

She started. Ser Davos stared at Jon, expecting an answer, but she held Jon and Brienne’s attention. The map reorganization complete, Jon bent over the table, reevaluating, twiddling stones cast aside and his weight braced on his knuckles. And so much of the weight in that stare collapsed on Sansa’s shoulders, he waiting for her as much as the seaman waited for him. She hadn’t heard the question, so how was she to reply?

Hearing this somehow, miraculously, Brienne repeated, “What plan did you pitch in the letters you sent?”

Sansa’s throat thickened. “We don’t have one,” she answered faintly. Not an A or a B or a C and certainly nothing to connect the dots into something resembling a feasible plan.

“The Dreadfort was as far as we got,” Jon begrudged.

“This is why you should’ve come to me when you first received the letter.” Ser Davos sighed, scrubbing his face. Beard burn inflamed his hands when they dropped to his side. “We’ll devise a rough idea tonight so you have something to offer the lords and ladies if they choose to enlist in your army.”

That split the silence in Sansa. They were sloughing along slower than they wished, but “’If they choose to enlist?’”

Brow pinched, she eased around the table, laying roots on Jon’s right and across from Ser Davos, wanted to see the man’s face in the light as he nodded. “I don’t know how familiar you are with northerners, Ser Davos, but loyalty runs like ichor through our veins. It’s ingrained in us. We’re suspicious of outsiders, and while House Bolton isn’t an outsider they have no claim to inherit my ancestral seat. It doesn’t belong to them and the whole of the north knows it. And they will fight for that.”

“You’re within your right to believe that, m’lady,” Ser Davos said.

“Please refrain from talking down to me, ser,” Sansa snapped. Out of the corner of her eye Jon moved, aligned with her shoulder to shoulder. Her nails dug harder into the table, cutting a crease in the map. “Eddard Stark is gone, but Brandon and Rickon Stark live. Robb Stark is gone, but Jon Snow lives. I live. And while we are alive we will fight for our home. Alongside the houses truly sworn to us. Because loyalty never dies, Ser Davos. You may not be optimistic of our chances, but I am.”

“Your brother destroyed any faith your truly-sworn houses had in the Stark when he abandoned his
allies during the War of the Five King and wedded a foreigner,” Ser Davos reminded her. “So I suggest having more than your name alone to win back allegiance. A great deal more because the Warden of the North is a disturbed man and no one is going to risk ending up on his cross for a lost cause.”

Sansa’s chest flamed hot. “We’re not—”

“If you don’t have an army, a leader, or a battle plan, you are.”

She scoffed. The sound fluttered off into a laugh, breathy and light, as she wrung her hands taunt. “Alright,” she said. “I’ve registered your opinion, Ser Davos, but, pray, tell me what you see on this map. Because I see us standing here utterly defenseless and alone. You say we need a plan to gain any men for our army, and I understand that. But we cannot formulate a plan without an idea of how many men we have.”

“It is a conundrum, m’lady,” Ser Davos said.

“It is,” Sansa agreed. “We’ve given the free folk a fortnight for their diversion. The other houses won’t take as long to reply, and when they do we will discuss a plan. With the lords and ladies who give us those men. This is their fight too.”

Jon smiled, and with it returned the pride she felt before, the one that made her want to blush and spindle hair around her finger from the way he looked at her. It shook her hand and declared itself her new best friend, because she wanted to inspire that look for the rest of her life. She wanted to make her parents proud and Arya proud and Brienne proud and maybe even Tyrion, wherever he landed in the world, the first to see her and marvel, “You may survive us yet.”

She especially wanted to make Jon proud just so he’d look at her like that for the rest of her life. Because it was no longer mildly addicting, she decided, but extremely.

“We all concur we’re at a crossroad, yes? Yes?” Ser Davos jerked his gaze to each of them, even to Brienne, until they nodded. “So you look outside your regular bannermen. For example, as we already have, the free folk. Where else might we find fighters who aren’t amassed in noble northern house?”

Jon exhaled loudly. “There is…”

Looping around Sansa, he retrieved the candle from her bedside, cupping his hand around the flame to keep the wind from snuffing it out, and set it in the Narrow Sea. Illuminating the Vale. The Eyrie. Lord Baelish.

No.

No, no, no.

Sansa agreed to take back Winterfell whatever the cost, but the cost of accepting Petyr’s offer was too much. Making him requisite, they’d be indebted to him, have to reward him, and what was to stop him from trying to purloin her while Jon fought on the frontlines? Because she knew Petyr Baelish, who never got his hands dirty in politics nevertheless in combat, would never be a pikeman or a mounted soldier. He’d insist on remaining behind the lines. With her. Always with her.

No.

“What about the mountain clans?” she abruptly pitched. “I know the Skagos clans ignored Robb’s call for bannermen, but our family has a history with the mountain clans.”
“Sansa—”

“Didn’t they call Father ‘the Ned’? And they settle at Winter town half the season.”

“They’re rough people, Sansa,” Jon cautioned. He looked at her with a rueful frown, the opposite of what she wanted, the opposite of what she ever wanted from him.

She was stalling, and she knew he knew it. They may have been surrounded by the black knights, but Petyr had the decency to provide the offer in not so much a hush as quieter than usual, the wind drowning it out except for those closest to him. If Jon brought up said offer now, to Ser Davos, to Brienne, more people would know and those more people would spread it to more people until the whole camp knew someone’s armed forces was ready to fight for them, ready to decimate the enemy, and Sansa contemplated declining.

She didn’t understand why he was suddenly so willing to confide in a man he shut out for the past eleven days.

“And we’re fighting a rough man. Mayhaps like will compliment like,” Sansa said. “What have we to lose?”

“The Wulls are the most powerful of the clans,” Ser Davos said, “and Clan Norrey is friendly with Castle Black, but—”

“But the Norreys and the First flint will never fight alongside us because we’re allied with the free folk. And the Wulls clash with the ironborn. The reason the mountain clans settle in Winter town is because they suffer massive population loss during the winter,” Jon groused. Hip leaned on the table, he laid his hand on Sansa’s wrist. “I’m sorry, Sansa, but we need the Vale’s forces. There’s no one else.”

Sansa wrenched her arm away from him. Backed away until she caught the glint of silver in the corner of her eye and Brienne blocked the wind from pushing her the other way.

Ser Davos perked up, asked, “Lord Arryn has made an offer to you?”

“On Lord Arryn’s behalf, Lord Baelish offered the Knights of the Vale to us—”

“As has Queen Greyjoy with the Iron Fleet,” Sansa quarreled.

“We need the auxiliary, Sansa!”

“And what will he want in return?”

A lump pushed up her throat, too big to swallow around, coated in spikes that ripped her apart. Her nose stung and her eyes stung and tears threatened to topple her, but Jon couldn’t see her cry. She’d done her crying in front of him and now it was time for war. No one would follow her if they saw her as emotional.

She swallowed as hard as she could. “What if what he wants is me? What if he demands my hand in marriage?” Jon clamped his mouth shut and his jaw twitched, but he didn’t have an answer for her. “Everything Petyr Baelish does is motivated by something. And I don’t trust him.”

“You don’t have to trust him. You have to work with him. For the good of what we’re trying to do,” Jon said. “I know you have reservations, Sansa, trust that I do. But you were right. I know I championed Manderly, but they won’t get here in time. Half the houses we sent ravens to won’t get here in time. We need the Knights of the Vale if we hope for a fighting chance.”
He fidgeted as he talked, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Closer to her, Sansa noticed. Not combating her, but almost…pleading with her. “Lord Baelish serves one advantage. Is that one advantage worth being in the crosshairs of his further deception?”

“How isn’t it? For Rickon?”

“Don’t you use Rickon,” she scolded, her voice catching on the boy’s name. “That’s not fair.”

“War is rarely fair,” Brienne mused.

Yes, Sansa thought, and neither is love. And she loved her brothers; Bran, Rickon, and Jon. To any of the seven hells and back. And if Jon asked her not to do something – like talk to Ser Davos about Ramsay’s letter, for example – even if it was better for him that she did, she loved him enough to respect his wishes.

Right then, however, she didn’t think Jon would show her the same courtesy.

She tried anyway. “Please don’t respond to Lord Baelish yet,” she begged of Jon. “If you love me at all, please wait.”

Sansa waited for the straw to break the camel’s back.

Tension lancing her body, like sitting on the tip of a dagger not knowing which way she’d fall, which side she’d be most grateful for, she waited for the sky to tell her a secret. Sometimes from her tent, but mostly from the encampment’s perimeter, perched on a fallen log while Brienne trained Podrick no farther than her shadow stretched. Three days since the meeting with Ser Davos and Sansa still found it difficult to be in the same tent as Jon. He rarely vacated it, tapping and drumming and making so much noise she thought he wanted her to be constantly reminded of his presence. Of his waiting.

Thankfully Ghost, his exploring not yet sated, gave her an excuse to leave without being obvious about it.

She trailed behind him, and Brienne behind her, not pouting as much as the knight gave her evidence otherwise. (Sansa hated the word, pouting. It reminded her too much of her old self, her selfish self, spoiled rotten to anyone and anything that wasn’t agreeable to her.)

“You’re barely talking to Jon,” Brienne reminded her, early on the fourth afternoon, following Ghost as he tracked something through the snow. “You’ve minimized discussing anything non-war-related with Ser Davos. And you’re not interacting with the wildlings. The only thing you are doing right is staying away from the Red Woman.”

“Do the children not count?” Sansa quipped, her head finally coming down from the sky and the raven she expected to streak by.

Brienne hurried up beside her. “Have you spoken with any of the children?”

Any child older than twelve went with the raiders, but those left behind had begun to gradually congregate around Brienne and Podrick’s sessions. Brienne’s voice got clearer, Podrick’s footwork cleaner, and they children drew closer and closer with every day. A few looked fresh out of boyhood, just missed the age requirement for conscription, but the others were young, too young, without their mothers for the first time, timid and fearfully mute who paid more attention to Sansa than anything else.
She hadn’t spoken to any of them. Admittedly too nervous around them. While Tormund was the exception, Sansa didn’t know how to talk to men and women more barbarian than she. Their children, either.

Except, maybe, for two girls. They, in particular, seemed to be most keen on her, suddenly popped up at the end of her perch that same afternoon. Sansa had seen them around the camp, hands affixed to each other and playing with some of the younger boys, but up close they were quiet things, small things, not ten and six. And the oldest, Gods, her eyes were a blue that could rivals Sansa’s in infamy.

“Hello.” The youngest girl shyly hid partially behind her sister. Neither said a word. Repurposing all the warmth she remembered feigning in court, Sansa smiled and scooted further down the log. Invited, “Would you like to sit with me?”

“We’re not supposed to,” the oldest replied.

You don’t know them, Sansa. “Oh.”

She shouldn’t’ve been surprised. Of course their mother wouldn’t want them interacting with a southroner, northern blood or not; savages were savages no matter their homestead.

But then the youngest stepped girl into the sunlight and the strands of hair peeking out from the fur hood burst auburn. She stepped forward again and her head eclipsed the sun filtering through the trees. “What’s your name?” Sansa asked.

“Willa,” she said. It earned her a sharp jerk from her sister, a silent reprimand for disobeying whatever boundary line they were told not to cross.

Sansa passed a hand over her chest and supplied them her name. Willa picked up her braid hanging over her right shoulder, tongue poking out the side of her mouth as she fingered the skein, and Sansa wondered what she looked like to these girls. If plush like a doll or glossy like a dream. Or bizarre. She wondered if their mother told them bedtime stories too, wondered who from those stories they dreamt of being. If they dreamt of being a princess like she did, or a knight like Brienne. Like their mother (she presumed).

“I can show you how to braid your hair,” Sansa offered, refrained from twisting an end piece. “Or I can do it, if you’d like.”

Willa beamed.

“Girls!”

They flinched. The other children scattered as a woman stormed up to them, her huffs and puffs louder than the singing swords, wrinkled lips set in a firm line on her weathered face. She took up each of the girl’s hands, glowering at Sansa as she yanked them back to the camp. Willa’s yelps at being torn away carried across the field to the fire pit, whimpers lost in distance but clear in sight as the woman sat her and her sister on the ground in a circle of other womenfolk.

You don’t know them, Sansa.

The women watched Sansa approach, their hands moving mechanically against the tree branches they were whittling down to spears. A pipe dream that they’d be used, but something was better than nothing, Sansa supposed. She wrangled her hands in her lap, a show of courtesy and neutrality, as she halted before them.
Of the four, three of the women were older, about Maester Luwin’s age when last Sansa saw him. The fourth wasn’t five years older than Sansa, rocking a slumbering newborn in her arms and humming softly to herself. There was a hardness to them – to every wildling, actually – their faces aged by lifetimes of hardship but bodies crafted by it. And these women were no different, gripping their knives with a precision that jumped ‘spearwife’ to the front of Sansa’s mind.

Again she thought of how she’d never be like them. Sadly.

The two girls blinked up at her from the women’s feet, and Sansa instantly turned to the woman who so furiously carted them away. She cleared her throat. “I apologize, madam, if my talking to your daughters offended you.”

“They’re not my daughters,” the woman refuted.

“They’re my nieces,” said the woman cradling the newborn, a shimmer to her hair the same as Willa’s. Of course. “And my nephew.”

Sansa nodded. “I see the resemblance,” she said. “Their beauty is a great testament to your family and their mother.”

“Is it?” The women snickered, like hens gobbling in their house, and red suffused Sansa’s cheeks, crept up from her collar. She realized she was a joke to them, just something to laugh at and point at, not strong enough to take seriously, not firm enough to listen to. Was this how Jon felt when first he entered their community? “If you’re going to cobble up that much bullshit,” the young woman said, “you better sit down so you don’t wear out your feet. Your Grace.”

She blushed harder. “That’s not…I’m not…” Her lip snagged on her teeth. “May I?”

“Do all you ladies ask permission to do something you were invited to do?” wondered the woman she wrongly presumed mothered Willa and her sister.

“Pela,” the younger woman scolded.

Pela rolled her eyes, carving her thumb over the point of the spear she pared as Sansa sat on the newborn’s left, cagey of disturbing the baby and further incurring Pela’s ire. “Is that what makes you highborn?”

“No, no, no,” another trilled. “Highborns have noble parents, like lords or kings and queens.” She flicked her long cobwebs behind her and craned around Willa’s aunt to peer at Sansa. “Is it true you were betrothed to the king on that sword chair?”

“It is,” Sansa answered. Willa gasped at the information, told enough, then, from stories to know what betrothed to a king meant. What that made her; not quite a princess, but almost a queen. She tried on a smile. “Once upon a time.”

“I heard you poisoned the king.”

The woman across from her shook her head, gossiped, “I heard you married his uncle. Is he actually an imp like everyone says?”

“If you two don’t shut your mouth I’ll let you put him back to sleep,” the young woman snipped as the baby stirred in her arms. The others quieted obligingly, and she cooed at the baby, shook his little hand that poked out as he squirmed and yawned. A little bouncing and he settled down again, needle-sized fingers grasping his swaddle. Sansa’s heart swelled. “I apologize for Gretta and Katia. We don’t meet many royals where we’re from.”
Sansa flushed again, chagrin seemingly her natural state among these women. “I’m not royal.”

“But you could have been. Why didn’t you go through with the marriage?”

“He wasn’t… a very kind man,” Sansa remarked carefully, all too aware of Willa and glancing at her. “And he found someone prettier.”

“They always do,” Pela muttered, cinching the spear between her thighs. With a nod of approval, she deposited it behind on the left and selected another branch from her right. She struck the shiv and the first flake of bark split into the fire.

“But you’re pretty,” Willa’s sister boasted. She hugged her legs to her chest and wedged her chin in the joint where her knees touched, Willa immediately copying her.

Sansa tucked her crossed ankles tighter against the log. “Thank you…”

“Johanna,” her aunt said. “And I’m Aja.”

“Aja,” Sansa repeated, rolling it aloud the way she had any other wildling name, foreign and in need of repetition to get just the right inflection. Aja, Johanna, Katia, Gretta, Pela, Willa. The women had definitely developed a pattern in their naming. “I’m Sansa—”

“We know,” Pela piped in. “Sansa Stark, Lady of Winterfell and the True Queen in the North. The Vanishing Woman.”

The… Sansa snorted, swiped it quickly behind her hand. “‘The Vanishing Woman’? Is that what you call me?”

Gretta shrugged, commented playfully, “Not to your face.”

“We hear it’s a miracle you’ve survived this long,” Aja said. “A miracle or a stunning guise of skill.”

Absurd, Sansa wanted to say. “I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“Then what would you call it?”

“Luck,” she guessed.

“No one’s luck is that generous.”

That was true. Luck wouldn’t have gotten her into all the frightening, threatening situations she found herself playing the damsel in. Luck wouldn’t have made her marry Ramsay Bolton. Luck wouldn’t have left her with no one but Littlefinger. Luck wouldn’t have let Joffrey Baratheon be her first kiss. Luck wouldn’t have cut Father’s head off. Luck wouldn’t have taken her to King’s Landing in the first place.

Luck would’ve kept her home, safe in her mother’s arms.

Hells, it sounded like luck ruined her life with its absence.

Begging for something to do with her hands, Sansa rearranged her skirts, hemmed again with mud. She picked at the caking like a scab. “I suppose not,” she chortled. “But you’ve survived much worse than I ever have. Were you all at Hardhome?”

Every one of them nodded and went quiet. Back on the beach. Back in the water. “My sister, Karsi,
was our chieftain,” Aja recalled. “She put the four of us on a boat and said she’d be right behind us. But she didn’t make it. Gretta lost her two sons and Pela lost her daughter. We know what Jon Snow did for us. He could’ve given up and left us to die, but he didn’t. He’s why we’re still alive. We’ll fight for him, Lady Stark, in whatever way you need.”

“But you aren’t,” Sansa hesitantly noted. “I mean, you didn’t go with the party.”

“I would’ve, but…”

Trailing off, Aja motioned Johanna to her. The girl sprang to her feet and hopped over her sister, dancing on her tiptoes for Aja to transfer the baby into her arms. She held the boy expertly, Sansa noticed, an ease she only conquered when Rickon came along. Johanna returned to her spot, resituating her brother, leaving Aja with free arms to cup around her abdomen.

Pushing on the furs she wore, she revealed a bulging belly swollen with child. Several moons long, it looked.


Aja exchanged a smile with the rest of the circle. Sansa picked harder at the mud. “In our culture it’s bad luck to name your child before he or she reaches two years of age,” Pela explained. “If they reach two years of age.”

“Babes like him,” Aja said, motioning to the baby whose head Willa traced circles on, “are given milk names until their official naming.”

“So the babe that died a few nights ago wasn’t named?”

Aja shook her head, and somehow that stung Sansa worse than watching Aja snuggle her nephew, than seeing her belly. Sansa was rarely maternal, her Lady Mother never to comment that her daughter wanted children when she was a child or was particularly motherly to her younger siblings. But she still felt the wrongness of it. That any person of this world – no matter how small, how lowborn or wild – could leave without a name to be remembered by. With nothing to put on a marker in the lichyard. Nothing to say they were ever there but their family whose memories would die with them.

Sansa embedded a nail under a bit of dried mud and like clay, it broke off, flung halfway across the circle, nearly touching Pela’s boot. She went on to the next and the next, chipped a line down to her hems. Then a shiv appeared in her sight line. Looking up, she saw Katia extending it to her. Offering it to her. Sansa accepted the knife, but then just held it, turned it over in her hand, unsure of what they meant for her to do with it. She didn’t have any branches to whittle or skins to scrape the blood off of.

“I guess ladies don’t get educated in everything,” Katia said and motioned to her own leg, pantomiming a picking motion from shin to end.

Oh. Sansa murmured her thanks and set about it, took the fabric in one hand and worked the blade under the caking in the other. The first chunk – larger than the others, more satisfying too – flew off with a wet plop to the ground. Sansa turned a grin into her arm; it was her first taste of victory in days.

“So,” Aja started conversationally, “what will you name your child someday?”
“Sansa.”

Sansa needn’t look to know who it was. Jon’s shadow loomed up from behind her, rocking backward and forward, back and forward, teetering by the look of it. Teetering on his toes, teetering on whether to interrupt the scene. You don’t know them, Sansa. She wondered if she could argue against that now. Doubtful, but maybe. At least she tried.

“Pardon my intrusion,” he said, gaze traveling around the circle, “but Lord Glover and an emissary from House Condon have arrived.”

Chapter End Notes

House Glover still holds a grudge so can Jon and Sansa convince him to merge forces?
I will keep you safe and sound

Chapter Summary

He may not have felt winter's icy fingers anymore, but he felt the cold of her gone, felt her absence leech all the warmth she animated him with.

Gods, he missed her. He never realized he could miss someone who stood right in front of him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“How long have they been here?”

“Only a few minutes.”

Jon elongated his stride to keep pace with Sansa, hesitance shortening her determined yet slightly hitched steps the closer they returned to their tent. To the men inside it. She fiddled absentmindedly with her gloves, tugging on the glare at her cuff though it was fit to her fingers, though the ruching was cinched to her wrist. Nerves. One of the worst things to get the better of you.

(They were infecting Jon too; he felt his own heart hammer to the clip of their quick stride.)

Letting go of her gloves, Sansa moved onto a fretting of a different nature. “We didn’t send a letter to House Condon,” she stated.

“No,” Jon confirmed.

And unnecessarily, for Sansa prattled on, more to herself as she worked the information through. “They wouldn’t be here unless Lady Cerwyn received our letter and wants to declare, but can’t do so herself because Castle Cerwyn is so close to Winterfell and that’s why she sent a representative to do it for her. Did this emissary give his name?”

“Ser Kyle Condon,” Jon said.

Sansa nodded, exhaled. “And Lord Glover.”

He would be their hardest sell. Something they knew many nights ago as they spread a strand of parchment under Sansa’s hand and deliberated for a number of hours how to word their petition. Robb may have diluted the strong loyalty between the houses with bad blood, but the Glovers were intrinsic to the siege’s success. Because unlike walking into Castle Black’s common hall where the men had already decided on their end, to have Robett Glover at their backs was to have the word of the rest of the north too and, therefore, a chance at surviving.

Mere feet from the tent Sansa stopped, stuck in the tread path and people veering around her. Jon pulled up short too, looked at her to ask why, but he clamped his mouth shut on the spot. Because it wasn’t nerves parting her lips and stuttering shallow breath in her breasts. It was fear. Fear they’d be laughed at, she for being a woman and him for being baseborn. Fear the answer would be no.
Fear they’d fail.

And it wasn’t an invalid fear.

This was their first exhibit of hosting other lords, not just to break bread and trade war stories that Sansa didn’t have but Jon had too many of but to ask for portions to complete their army as well, and if they weren’t successful… If they weren’t successful in rallying Lord Glover it’d spread they were imbeciles and inexperienced in the art. Childish and fools, not worth risking their necks.

Jon stuck his elbow out and prodded Sansa’s arm to look at him. Look at him. Please. He’d cushion her trepidation with a reassuring smile, say we can do this though she’d gotten better at reading him and didn’t need him to say it. She’d tacitly know if she’d just look at him.

But she twisted her hands. His jaw twitched. “I know you bear anger towards me for wanting to accept Lord Baelish’s offer—”

“I don’t—”

“You do,” Jon persisted. Can’t you feel it, he wanted to say.

Recently conversations between them only happened in his head, where he spoke a hundred different things to her a day, from the mundane to her confidence. Every time she passed him or readied to slip from the tent the words dawdle on his tongue, almost said, almost went to her. Such was too sharp a contrast from the days immediately after their reunion, rarely flagging in their time together. He may not have felt winter’s icy fingers anymore, but he felt the cold of her gone, felt her absence leech all the warmth she animated him with.

Gods, he missed her. He never realized he could miss someone who stood right in front of him.

But how to tell her?

“This is the most you’ve spoken to me in four days,” he said. “You won’t stay in the tent except to sleep. You won’t talk to me. You won’t look at me.”

Sansa sucked down a breath and looked at him. Angled her whole body to face him, forcing a pair of children to split around them. The boys ran off giggling, batting at each other with branches like they were swords, but Sansa’s stare never strayed away from Jon. “It’s not your wanting to accept Lord Baelish’s offer,” she said. “It’s that I’m expecting you to. I’m waiting for you to.”

His shoulders drooped. “Then why are you cross with me if you know I intend to accept the offer?” He didn’t need the answer, but she did. He wanted her to say it. He knew she was angry – had all the discretion of her mother in that department – but if she wanted to throw a tantrum and freeze him out because he planned to use someone to save thousands of lives he wanted her to hear herself say why out loud.

“Because I’ve tried telling you what Littlefinger is like and you won’t listen,” Sansa said. And then she turned away from him. Again. Back to the topic at hand. Squaring her shoulders, she exhaled the girl, inhaled the queen. “But I don’t want to discuss this further right now. We have a war to attend to.”

Without a word Jon took up the tent flaps and permitted her to sweep in before him.

Lord Robett Glover looked gruffer than he sounded, stood next to Davos and a wheezing laugh discharging from his open mouth. Jon wondered if his face ever colored as scarlet as his surcoat. Davos grinned with enough mirth, went on from cordially regaling the lord with the smuggling
exploit which earned him the nickname Onion Knight to that of a particular man who paid him a healthy coin to ship a bear for “decent fucking hunting.”

Side by side they looked more brothers than Lord Glover to Galbart Glover; same manicured beard encapsulating half their face, same rigid nose and sunken eyes, same wide forehead. But whereas Davos’ hairline had just begun to recede, Lord Glover’s was gone almost entirely, left with a band from ear to ear and a few white wisps combed over atop his head.

Ser Kyle Condon chuckled on Lord Glover’s other side, a goblet poised at his lips and his black mustache pulled in a smile over the rim, utterly enraptured by their stories. Younger than they, he had a face Sansa would deem handsome, thin lips parenthesized by a goatee, the skin around his eyes wrinkling as he laughed. But all Jon saw was how perfectly smooth that face still was. Unmarred by combat. Without any tales of his own.

“My lords,” Sansa said crisply, “thank you for coming. These are unstable times and you’ve put yourselves at great risk coming here. I thank you for doing so.”

The handsome knight bowed customarily in greeting, his memory serving to remind him that Sansa was, technically by the funeral pyre Roose Bolton burned on, the Lady of Winterfell (and soon-to-be widow if Jon had any say in the matter). Lord Glover did not have as steep a memory. He instantly sobered on Sansa’s voice and turned to her. So cold was his stare that she fidgeted, thought she said something amiss and seemed to wrack her mind for a way to amend it.

She managed, “How were your journeys? Without incident, I hope.”

“It was, my lady, thank you,” Ser Kyle responded, setting his goblet aside. He looked to Lord Glover to follow, to at least partake in the traditions of old, but deep damnation hardened the man’s face. “However,” Ser Kyle went on, “I do feel it’s my duty to inform you I spotted two men patrolling the woods as I passed into the New Gift. I assume they were Bolton scouts searching for you.”

“Did their shields identify them as such?” Davos questioned.

Ser Kyle shook his head. “They were dressed rather nondescript, actually, but they had a look about them.”

Sansa nodded, though her lips puckered and though she tipped her chin to the right, to where Jon stood. “Thank you for the intelligence, Ser Kyle. We’ll be diligent.”

“Enough with the fucking thanks!” Lord Glover roared, slamming his goblet onto the table and knocking over Ser Kyle’s with an audible plink. Both banged against the walls, reverberating off and throwing about the room; at the knights who flinched a hand to their swords, at Jon who grasped Sansa’s arm. The spilled wine bled through the map. “We’re not here for pleasantries, girl.”

Sansa composed herself accordingly, whatever nervous tremor lost to the face of this man. “Then why are you here, Lord Glover? Aside from disturbing my camp.”

“I came out of respect for your father. And I want to know who’s declared for you,” Lord Glover barked.

“It would please me to give you that information if you would receive me with respect,” Sansa seethed back at him.

Jon’s lips turned to a heaven. Gods, the mettle of her. The metal of her. Kissed by fire as long as you give her the flint.
He pried his fingers from her arm one by one, and one by one he felt the pressure release, the enormity of it. How hard had he grabbed her? Inordinately? Enough to leave bruises? He stepped back to flank her shoulder, head down and reprimanding himself for hurting her, even accidentally.

He expected her to jump apart from him the moment she was cleared, but Sansa stayed put. “In the last day we’ve received support via raven from Houses Ashford, Caulfield, Mazin, Mormont, and Wibberly,” she said.

“Who?” Davos piped in.

Sansa switched her scowl to him. “Lord Mazin has supplied us with one hundred and forty-three men. Be kind.”

“I hear you’re in bed with the wildlings,” Lord Glover said to Jon, not bothering to hide his disdain of the free folk. Jon expected to encounter the ill opinion a dozen more times until the battle, the prejudice inherited and grown in passion through the generations, so widely held throughout Westeros that it was why he’d reluctantly agreed to send the warriors southwest. “As we’re in a wildling camp I take it the rumors are true.”

“Yes, sir,” Jon said, chewed on a few more choice words he kept tightly to his chest. “Five hundred of the free folk’s best warriors remain here for our army, but the bulk has been detached to the Dreadfort.”

“Why?”

“Because we knew noble lords and ladies such as yourselves wouldn’t be comfortable fighting alongside the free folk. Hence, they’ve been relegated as a diversion,” Sansa explained, and blessedly at that. “After working so hard for legitimization,” Sansa continued, “Lord Bolton won’t allow his ancestral seat to be raided and conquered. He’ll send soldiers from his own army to aid the garrison.”

“You believe that will work?” Ser Kyle asked, one of his fingers dancing on his felled copper goblet. He circled it further across the map, tracking pearls of wine behind it.

Sansa shrugged. “Ramsay likes games. He might see through it and do nothing, or he might not,” she speculated. “For all he knows Lord Commander Snow and I are part of the raiding party so we can run away. At the very least Lord Bolton will send troops to determine if that’s the case.”

“Maybe you should’ve run away.” Lord Glover crossed his arms. “Saved us all the trouble.”

“Sir, trouble’s coming to your door whether you want it to or not,” Jon said. “It’d serve you best to listen to my sister in the matters of Ramsay Bolton.”

The lord sneered, growl rumbling up from low in his chest. “Why should I? She—”

“She knows our enemy better than any of us do.” Seven hells, this man. He rubbed Jon wrong, bubbled anger in his chest, more than the common distaste for the free folk, more than his easily-invoked outburst directed by Jon and Sansa driving it close to boil. He was too unpredictable, too many threads unraveling, perhaps.

“I don’t dispute that, but she’s a woman. And a Stark. Both of which aren’t reputable in commanding wars. You don’t have an army and to me you sound even greener than your brother. I won’t follow a Stark who’ll order me to charge my death.”

Sansa had taken to idling around the table, languid and ghostly, observing the men and their quarrels,
only restored her voice in objection. “I understand your hesitance, Lord Glover. But Jon was Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. This is his army and…” She looked at Jon then, stopped in her tracks and looked at him. Really. Finally. Her expression softened, and for a breath – just a breath, for Jon blinked and it was gone again – her stoicism cracked. Like her mind cleared. Like she heard herself.

Mercy, she was going to hate him when she found out what he did.

Reaching him, she passed a hand up his arm. Said again, “This is his army, and as their commander he’ll do what’s best for them. For all of us. Because he cares about his men. He cares for their lives more than he does his own. Our brother made mistakes,” she agreed with Lord Glover, “but they were his own. He didn’t listen to his people—”

“Aye,” Lord Glover snarled. “I’m lord of my house because Robb Stark didn’t listen.”

“We will. Our brother expected you to align with his motivations instead of the other way around. Punish us for his transgressions if it pleases you, sir. But what would you gain from doing so?”

“What would I gain going against the Boltons? When the ironborn laid siege to Deepwood Motte and imprisoned my family, they were the ones to assist in retaking my castle,” he told her, the first she or Jon had heard of the Bolton’s showing any such benevolence. The shock of it quickly wore off as Lord Glover stalked up to Sansa, aggrieved and dripping his next words. “And where was your brother? Betraying a contract with the Freys and making a family with his whore.”

Jon resisted every urge to lay a hand on the man, to encourage him a foot back. Davos did it for him. “Is that what you want, Lord Glover?” Sansa beckoned, not quite as ready to untether from him as the others were. “An ironborn head?”

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to make promises you can’t keep?”

“Who said I can’t?”

Another one of Robb’s fallacies, Jon heard. People always told you what was most important to them, vengeance and justice chief among them, but Robb hadn’t been so open. Jon remembered him as single-minded, and he wouldn’t have promised anything to his bannermen to keep them pursuing his one goal if it didn’t achieve anything. It was how he lost the Karstarks, why they disavowed.

Whether Sansa heard that the same as he, or if she learned it at King’s Landing or after, Jon didn’t know, but it felt dangerous playing the lesson learned. Especially since Yara Greyjoy pledged to them. Especially if they wanted to retie those bonds.

“You’re already going against the Lord Bolton by being here,” Sansa reminded their two guests. “And you are here. You left your home and you traveled to this camp to speak with my brother and me, which I’d say means you have some interest in this fight. Some part of you wants to fight with us. So join us. Because Lord Bolton will come after you anyway.”

Lord Glover stewed, while Ser Kyle stared, dazzled. Because Sansa wasn’t bred to be a queen; she was born to be a queen. And these men were just realizing it, as staggered, astounded, mesmerized as Jon was when he witnessed it for the first time. (In the time since he’d realized she was born for more than him, he forevermore a bastard, hardly good enough, both in match and man, though he wanted to be.)

“What’s your plan?” Ser Kyle inquired on after a moment.

“We have a few,” Sansa said, twisting her hands behind her back. “Which would you like to hear
“The one that’ll win,” replied Lord Glover.

She, Jon, and Davos exchanged a glance. After putting to bed any misgivings Davos had about including Sansa – her first taste of victory on that front, spiking her confidence for the same that would come at her again and again, demanding she prove herself for a female as much as Jon for a bastard – they’d strategized until well after the sun set and Podrick brought food for their plates.

Every angle considered and everyone’s concerns brought to the table, only one was substantial enough to call it done. Jon breathed deeply and drew up to the table. “That’d be the pincer move.”

The others colluded around him.

“We can all agree Ramsay Bolton has a cunning mind, but his sadism and overconfidence controls him. He enjoys killing and ruling with fear,” Sansa said, “but he expects his people to give and be happy not receiving anything in return. He starves them and expects them to remain loyal. We know better.” Swiping Lord Glover’s goblet aside, she pointed to each of the houses scattered about the north. “If enough of the noble houses turncloak on him you won’t have to fight alongside the free folk because you can fight for your dominion.”

“We’ll surround Lord Bolton and his army,” Jon continued, stretching across the table to turn Stark stones and Bolton stones face to face. House verses house. Inheritance verses usurper. Husband verses wife. “Instead of meeting him with our full culled number we’ll approach him with a small cadre so he underestimates our strength. We don’t want to hit him full tilt. Not yet.”

“You won’t offer a parley?” Ser Kyle asked.

Sansa shook her head. “He’d never agree even if it was his best option.”

“And then, on our signal, the other houses attack from their angles,” Jon said. As Ser Davos slid the stones of the various other houses in a perfect crescent around the Bolton army, rampaging him, outnumbering him, Jon noticed the Greyjoy stones were missing. And for once he was glad of their mistake. Their presence on the board would’ve wheeled Lord Glover around by now. “And if enough of the horses survive the initial combat we’ll herd the Bolton army in a death pit.”

“Slaughter them in a double-envelopment,” Ser Kyle breathed, not repulsed but wondrous. Sansa grinned; it was the exact reaction they were hoping for. It was a regrettable course of action, but like had to answer like if they wanted to win.

Sansa nodded her head sideways. “Essentially.”

“Why did you select this strategy?”

“Because,” — Lord Glover didn’t notice Sansa’s eyes rove over to him as she spoke, studying the map as he was, indulging her and Jon and this plan he had to deem doable to raise his banners — “this way you’re fighting for your territory. For your home and your family’s safety. Not just for a Stark.”

“As you informed us, Ser Kyle, Lord Bolton has already employed scouts,” Davos stated. “It’ll be difficult hiding whole armies on the eve of the battle—”

“But it can be done.”

The others jerked around to look at Lord Glover. Straightened, one arm lax at his side and the other
falling to his belt, he gave Jon and Sansa a curt nod and hastily quit the tent.

He didn’t get far. Paused halfway to the crudely-constructed paddock Podrick tethered his and Ser Kyle’s horses to, he looked southeast at a trio of young boys, a trench half dug at their feet.

The trenches were Jon’s idea, wanted to line them around the perimeter and plant the spears in them like palisades, but still being hundreds of miles from Winterfell and thus danger it was a waste of energy and resources. Then Tormund suggested digging not trenches but holes big enough for a horse to stumble in to and hiding them under brush on Winterfell’s side of the battlefield. Despite Davos vehemently citing the risk that they were as likely to sink their own army as Ramsay’s, the idea captivated Jon ever since. They marched south in less than a week and any trenches dug were practice for the traps they planned to spend two nights digging in the plain.

The boys Lord Glover watched were too young to march with the raiders and thus too young to accompany the army south, doomed to again stay behind with their elders, but it didn’t stop them from trying to prove themselves superior. To Jon or to each other. The ruddy-haired boy with faint whiskers on his cheeks held the other two back from each other, a hand on their chests as they swung at one another, teeth bared.

Lord Glover curled his lip in disgust. “What’s to be done with the rest of them?”

“During the battle the elders, women, and children will be moved in the tunnels beneath Mole’s Town,” Jon answered. “As for after…that’s up to them. Ideally I’d like to get them settled somewhere they won’t have to compete for game or farming.”

“Somewhere north?”

“Somewhere north,” he concurred.

Lord Glover squinted at Jon, sizing him as his mother’s son or his father’s bastard. Calculating his history and his leadership abilities and whether his walk matched their big talk. He sighed. “Alright, Lady Stark, you have my men,” he pledged, and sat his hands upon his pudgy hips. “I’ll ride to speak with Rodrick Forrester in the morning. He’s been a changed man since the Whitehills defected to House Bolton and occupied Ironrath. Pray this fight reinvigorates him. When do we meet glory on the field?”

“In ten days,” Jon said.

He and Lord Glover clasped arms. The man dug his fingers into Jon’s arm and Jon gripped as tightly, neither relenting in strength or interested in being the first to let go. Then Ser Kyle caught up to them and sidled up next to Sansa, murmuring something in her ear that prized him a soft laugh.

Jon dropped his arm and attention to the knight, mimicking Lord Glover’s scrutiny. “And you, Ser Kyle?” he asked a bit too forcefully. Anything to refocus the man off Sansa. “Will you join us?”

“Lord Commander Snow, I decided to follow you and Lady Stark the moment Lady Cerwyn handed me your letter.” Ser Kyle proclaimed, extending his hand to Jon. “You’ll have our approximation in the coming days.”

The two men shook hands – during which Jon probably squeezed a titch too hard by the wan of Ser Kyle’s smile and the resulting pointed look from Sansa – and then, unlike Lord Glover, having turned on his heel already and trooped on to his horse, Ser Kyle doffed his head to Sansa. That alone snaked annoyance through Jon, but then the man picked up Sansa’s hand and kissed her knuckles.

Sansa didn’t so much as blush, thank the Old Gods and the New. Ser Kyle was handsome, yes, hair
and dimples and face enough to tempt most maidens, but he wasn’t good enough. Not for Sansa. Not for anything more than falling to his knees and kissing her rings if she wore any. Not to set his designs on her and ask for her hand.

She deserved to be loved. Of anyone in the realm, she deserved it most, after the horror that was her last husband and the mockery that was her first. She deserved to be cherished and revered and reveled in and a husband who felt strangled being away from her, and while Ser Kyle would do those things by the fervid look of him, it’d be a political marriage all the same. And not the strongest.

Jon didn’t even know if she wanted to marry again, now that he thought of it. Doubtless she’d have to someday, if only to merge houses and produce an heir, but Jon wouldn’t blame her if she turned down every suitor come to her door. Gods forgive him, he’d support her decision.

Beside him, Sansa withdrew her hand and slithered her arm through Jon’s. “Thank you, ser. Please inform Lady Cerwyn of our appreciation.”

“That I will, my lady.”

She and Jon stayed rooted to the spot, watching the men struggling to hold their horses still as Jon’s colt stretched his long neck over the fence and nipped at their guests. Abandoning his sword half-tethered to his saddle pommel, Lord Glover threw up his arms and stomped at the horse. The colt bucked in his direction and cantered off.

Mounted and ready, the two men departed down the road they came, spitting mud behind them.

Sansa collapsed against Jon the moment they vanished below the horizon. The fear and nerves from before draining out and relief heaving her chest, she wilted, clutched his arm with both hands and dropped her head on his shoulder. She chuckled and Jon did too. “Seven down,” she said.

“And a half dozen to go,” Jon finished, turning his nose into her hair. Never had snow and winter smelled so sweet. “You did very well.”

“You did better.” She lifted her head and lessened her lock on his arm and for one deathly second Jon froze, on his tongue to beg her not to go so fast. But instead of receding from him, she propped her chin up. “The war tactic won Lord Glover.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “How about we both did well?”

“Agreed. We’re a good team.”

“Remember that when the lords want my head for killing Lord Bolton.”

He meant it in jest, but Sansa hugged his arm tighter as if the mob was already coming for him. “I won’t let them.” Then she paused, struggling to look at him. “I’m sorry I’ve been acting childishly towards you recently. I knew my behavior was rude, but I did it anyway. I don’t want to be indebted to Lord Baelish and I don’t want him believing he can still manipulate me. But I meant what I said. You’re the commander and you know what’s best for your men. Just…talk to me before you do anything.”

Jon assured her he’d try to from then on out, sealing it with a kiss on her forehead.

He ushered Sansa along and they made their way back to the tent in easy silence, stride stuttering only when children scampered across their path or they were stopped to answer a question. No one in the camp asked on the visitors, which Jon found strange. Anytime unrecognizable faces visited Father and Lady Stark when he and Robb were boys they sneaked around the castle, shadowing the
guests and peaking around corners, greedy for any information on who and why.

Maybe none of the free folk noticed the men, though alien they looked. Or maybe they knew strangers were to be expected in times of war. And strangers would be aplenty before this war was over.

“Why didn’t you mention the Greyjoys’ support?” he wondered aloud.

“I thought it best not to,” Sansa said. “If it’s revenge on the ironborn Lord Glover wants, we’ll find a way to give it to him to retain his loyalty.

“How might we do that?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know yet. Why?”

Jon shook his head, called it curiosity, and turned his gaze around the camp. Faint tendrils of smoke rose into the air and people crowded the fire pits, persistently feeding twigs and premature branches into the guttering fire as the wind threatened its return.

Using a scrap of cloth that looked like it’d seen better days, Brienne shined her sword’s pommel in one of the circles, dedicated wholly to the task and therefore ignoring Tormund’s show of acrobatics with his axe. He twirled it between his fingers and sliced it through the air in wide arcs, cutting the smoke to pieces, but his craggy charm was hardly spared a glance.

Jon alighted on the scene seconds after Sansa did. “I suspect Tormund is sweet on Brienne,” he observed.

“He’ll get his heart broken,” Sansa cooed.

“Why’s that?”

She bowed her head close to him, conspiratorial once again, back to a bit of her former self, the best kind and the kind Jon missed. He still found gossip to be frivolous to put it politely, but of everyone in the camp she came to him with it, and for that he loved gossip. “I have reason to believe Brienne is in love with Jaime Lannister and he is in love with her.”

“Jaime Lannister?” He shook his head, disbelieving. Brienne was a warrior, and an honorable one at that; why could an aureate Lannister fell her of all people? “What reason do you have to believe that? Is he not devoted to his sister?”

“Not anymore, I don’t think,” Sansa speculated. “While traveling Brienne told me about serving Mother and the things she was tasked with under Mother’s command. Like returning Ser Jaime to King’s Landing. But apparently their journey was fraught with peril, including an unfortunate incident where Brienne was thrown into a bear pit and Ser Jaime leapt in to rescue her.”

Jon scoffed. Said, “That doesn’t make him so valiant. I’d leap into a bear pit for you, Sansa.”

She hushed him. “When they finally arrived in King’s Landing he chose to stay and therefore so did she. And then Joffrey was poisoned and Jaime sent Brienne on a special mission to find Arya and me. He gifted his sword from Tywin Lannister to her. One of the few pieces of Valyrian steel left to the world.”

Of course. Jon glanced back at Brienne and watched her clean the sword – formerly Father’s sword, Ice, melted down and given to Tywin’s son and grandson respectively – realized she did so almost lovingly. Like it was a prize. Jon hummed.
“Why do you think there’s a Lannister lion on the pommel?”

“I hadn’t noticed,” he admitted.

“You hadn’t?”

“You trusted her, so I trusted her.”

Unwise, anyone else would’ve told him. Not everyone’s judge of character was reputed. “She named the sword Oathkeeper for him,” Sansa said, “a reference to some conversation they had that she won’t confess anything more about. I don’t believe she realizes her feelings for him. Or his for her.”

“Would she tell him if she did?”

She said wistfully, “If I loved someone in such a way I wouldn’t let them go a day without knowing it. My hope is that she’ll see him again when all of this is over.”

When all of this is over, yes.

They had to survive until then.

She had to survive until then.

Jon made it his mission to ensure that happened. Because he loved her. Because she deserved it. Because she was the only thing worth coming back to this wretched world for and there wasn’t much point in this place if she was missing from it, was there?

Because Valyrian steel was hard to come by Jon settled for the next best thing, what he could find in their Spartan camp. He unearthed a hatchet from Tormund’s store, its neck splintered in battle and with the man’s approval, clandestinely commissioned the blade be melted down into a poniard. The man finished the assignment in less than a day, the best of his trade and it showing in the beautiful craftsmanship Jon would be proud to gift Sansa.

Faint lines flowed up the hourglass handle, north to the pommel the smith carved into a horse’s head. The slightly curved blade was no longer than Jon’s open hand, from wrist to middle finger tip, perfect for her smaller hands and all the easier to tuck it up her sleeve or under her cloak. Hiding the dagger himself, Jon pricked himself and smiled down at the blood bead. It was sharp enough, then, to protect her from the consequences of what he’d done.

Sansa started spending more time in their tent after Lord Glover and Ser Kyle’s visit, and at first Jon worried she’d stumble upon the blade. But thank the moon and the stars in the sky, she didn’t, and the secret proved worth keeping a million times over for the shock that washed her face when he presented it to her.

She traced the little embellishments on the equine carving, the scooped nostrils and eyes, traveled down its flying mane and over the blade, and her silence was deafening. Seeds of doubt dropped in Jon’s gut and sprouted roots, the idea of wrong, mistake, what did you do, what did you do, mercilessly taking hold. “I had it made for you,” he managed when he couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Jon, I can’t—”
“Take it,” he said, sounded like begging and intended it to as he held the dagger out further. Still she wouldn’t take possession of it, staring at the knife nervously. To be understood, sure; if she gave him a needlepoint hoop and expected him to do something with it he’d be as lost as she looked.

But the old ways were dying, and with it everyone’s roles were changing.

“I won’t be there for you during the battle,” he said. “Brienne won’t be there for you. I need to know you have the means to protect yourself if I don’t….” Make it. Couldn’t get out the words. Sansa heard it anyway, felt it maybe, and her chin wobbled. “If anything happens while I’m gone you use this. You claw and you shred and you rip your way out.”

Sansa shook her head, stuttered, “I can’t do that.”

“You have to, Sansa. There’s so few of us left. Please.”

Jon pushed the dagger at her, take it, please, please, hands trembling and his confidence in this endeavor too. She lifted it out of his hands, gingerly, uncertainly, not like Arya who grabbed Needle with all the unfettered excitement of other girls and a new doll. But Needle had been given to Arya out of want for her to keep practicing, not to keep her safe. Arya could protect herself, and Jon knew Sansa could too, with a bit of training and a confident hand.

She turned the dagger over in her palm. A blank other side met her, and it only occurred to Jon as he looked at its plainness that he should’ve asked for a wolf to be rendered in the wood. “It’s beautiful,” Sansa breathed all the same. Closed the space between them and wrapped an arm around his neck, murmuring a thank you in his ear. “I’ll put it somewhere safe.”

“I mean for you to use it, Sansa,” he said.

“I know. But for now.”

For now she chose the stout stool she called a bedside table between her pallet and Jon’s, well within reach but beginning to overcrowd, an extinguished candle dripping its wick into the holder and a sleek bone comb decorated in an ornate scene teetering near off the edge.

Jon stared at the comb, double-sided and fine-toothed, and tried to place it there, or anywhere in the tent for that matter. But he couldn’t. Like it just materialized. “Sansa, where did you get that comb? Did you travel with it?”

“No. I found it on my bed three days ago,” she told him, glancing at the comb in question. “It’s one of the nicer brushes I’ve owned. Though I suppose it would be; The Red Woman is refined, if nothing else.”

“The Red Woman?”

“Don’t despair, she didn’t hex the comb, I promise. But she did leave a note. It’s an apology gift from Lady Melisandre,” she said, like it was of no consequence.

From Lady Melisandre.

She who didn’t heed his warning.

Don’t talk to Sansa, he said.

Don’t go near her, he meant.
Late the next morning and he still couldn’t find the woman. Halfway through his search he’d realized he hadn’t seen her in days. Not since before the raiders left for the Dreadfort could he place her. She was likely – smartly – avoiding him, confining herself to her tent to stay out of the crosshairs of his newly-minted temper. But she had to know it was merely a matter of time until the comb’s donor came to light.

Sansa, for her part, wasn’t bothered by the gift. Her side of the tent was empty when he woke, but Jon found her easily enough, against with the free folk women he ejected her from the day before. Her arms hanged limply at her side, hair frizzed at the temple, breathing labored and fatigue bending at the knee. She held the dagger in a reverse grip, a bit too tight before the free folk woman positioned in front of her loosened her fingers a touch.

The woman stepped back and directed Sansa to imitate her stance, right foot forward and both fists up. Jon stopped to watch as the woman beckoned Sansa forward, a taunting glimmer in her smirk. Sansa advanced, flung her arm up to ice pick the woman’s throat, and was blocked. Their arms clashed together hard, forearm to forearm. The woman parried, shoving Sansa’s thrusting arm down. Exactly where Sansa wanted her, it seemed, for she grinned. Dropping her arm, she folded under the woman and stabbed at her side.

The beauty of her almost frightened Jon.

“Well done,” he heard the other woman commend while the circle behind them applauded. “But don’t stop to gloat like that. It tips off your enemy.”

Another woman, heavy with child, scolded her, called her Pela, but Sansa brushed it off. “What else?”

“Did you notice what you did with your other arm? Don’t forget your other arm. You have to keep it up. In reverse grip both of your arms can defend you as opposed to in forward grip where only one can. So don’t forget to utilize them. Are you girls listening to me, too?”

Two girls Jon recognized from Hardhome chorused back, yes they were watching, yes they were listening. Pela scooted Sansa back. “Do it again. Remember your arm,” she reinforced.

They ran through the moves again, Pela demonstrating to Sansa how to deflect various countermoves, and Jon would’ve happily spent his whole day observing from the sidelines if a clutch of deep red hadn’t caught the corner of his eye. She breezed down the thoroughfare from Davos’ tent to her own, chin tucked to her chest and eyes as downcast. As inconspicuous as a woman draped in red could be against an iced landscape.

“Lady Melisandre,” Jon called. She halted in her tracks, twisting her neck just enough to peek over her shoulder at him. “A word?”

Chapter End Notes

So, should Sansa name the dagger Jon gave her? If so, what?
I can feel it coming in the air tonight

Chapter Summary

She survived him. She survived him. And even if fate lost her head in the coming days, that was cause to celebrate.

Chapter Notes

I. Am. So. Sorry.

I don't even know what happened.

No, wait, that's a lie. Here's what happened: this chapter kicked my ass. It kicked my ass hard and it wouldn't flow and it made me too nervous to sit down in front of it. There were real life issues as well (my job, Dallas, got sick again), but none of those are excuses (good enough).

Anyway, on a lighter note, how excited are we for GoT's 23 (!) Emmy nominations including for Maisie (!) and Kit (!!!)?! I mean, I wanted Sophie in there too, and the girl who played Lyanna Mormont for guest star, but Kit got nominated!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I won’t be there.

Oh, if Jon knew the fire he’d spark in her. Like the rain storms deep in the summer moons, fat drops on the stone, thunder and lightning splitting the sky. On those nights Sansa shrunk back, curled in on herself as the world cracked open all around her.

Jon cracked her open. Blasted past her fortifications. But instead of being frightened come new light, she felt churned anew.

She sprung first from her toasty furs, dressed in haste, in excitement, pushed a finger at her lips when Ghost roused at her leaving, tail thumping the ground beside Jon’s pallet. “Don’t wake him,” she whispered, skimmed her hand down Ghost’s back and tiptoed out of the tent.

Arya was the brilliant one at combat, who thwarted Bran’s practices with her bow and arrow, who whipped her Needle about their bed chambers, but still Sansa wanted to try. Still she tracked down Pela at daybreak and asked for lessons (showing off Jon’s gift with the same pride she once gleaned from new dresses and praise on her needlework).

Still she tried.

And she was surprisingly proficient. Or, proficient enough.

“Daggers are intimate weapons,” Pela said by way of introduction, directing Sansa side-face and popping a branch on the spots on her body to straighten, to correct. “Unlike a sword, you’re in a
close-range combat with your enemy and to be effective at stopping them the tip of your dagger has to jar the target in a sweet spot.”

“Sweet spot?” Sansa echoed.

Pela hummed. She held out her hand and looking down at it, Sansa placed the dagger in her palm. Twisting the blade’s tip around and around on the soft pad of her thumb for a moment, Pela’s long fingers wrapped around the hilt until they crossed each other in a forward grip.

Then she slipped up close. A bit too close for Sansa’s comfort, actually, could count every fleck in Pela’s amber eyes and watch her breath clouds evaporate in the air. Pela ghosted the blade against Sansa’s throat, a hairsbreadth from her skin. Behind her Katia tittered.

“The throat is the most well-known sweet spot,” Pela mused. “As is under the chin, right here. They’re effective, but don’t rely on them as your only points of entry. If you stab into your enemy’s armpit”—where the blade flashed—“you’ll incapacitate the arm. Strike the groin or inside of the thigh here”—and the blade lowered, tapping Sansa’s leg—“and you’ll have hit a vital artery that’ll bleed out in seconds.”

The blade trailed up Sansa’s front like a lover’s unhurried touch. She shuddered, and for a moment Sansa understood why some men ran at death, why they taunted its scythe closer, lusting over the power that came with it. Death had a hand on her so many times and she never had the power to change what happened to her. But the dagger gave her that power.

“The belly is a slow death,” Pela said, “but it won’t immediately stop your enemy. And neither will the chest or anywhere else in the torso. A sword will give you the drive, but a short blade like the one you wield will not lend you the strength needed to penetrate the breast plate or the ribs to puncture the heart or lungs.”

Pela stepped back and bent her arm at a perfect ninety-degree angle, the blade made to impale Sansa between the eyes. “There are eight directions an attack can come from and you need to be on guard for all of them. This is the first one,” Pela stated and feigned slashing Sansa across the chest. “Then there’s here,” Chopped into her left hip. “Here.” And around and around she went, clockwise on a sun dial, until she was where she started. “What did I hit?”

“Chest, hip, stomach, hip, chest, shoulder, head, and shoulder;” Sansa prattled off.

“Good.” Pela returned the dagger to Sansa and instructed, “Now show me. Slowly. Speed comes with practice.”

Sansa did her best to imitate the directional thrusts, again and every time Pela told her to, cutting the air faster each time. The camp woke around them, cooked and sewed and dug and trained. Pela taught her reverse grip and its swiftness, taught her deception and the countermoves to free herself from any scrape. Even Brienne interjected, marrying a little of her mastered finesse to Pela’s wild survival.

Morning passed over their heads, dawned on five hours later and the knife began to feel like an anvil anchoring Sansa’s arm to the ground. She noticed Jon watching her earlier, his eyes and all those who stopped to gander invigorating her, locking a vow in her heart that by time they marched in five days no one would laugh at her anymore. Her hold was firm and unflappable, and Pela feigned the wrong way and Sansa sliced several hairs off her jerkin, and no one would dare.

Until Jon’s sharp cry of Lady Melisandre’s name broke her concentration.
Pela lifted Sansa’s arm to first direction in reverse grip then shifted her until the dagger speared from underhand. Told her to hold. Hold. A sting shot up and down Sansa’s arm, and she swallowed the distress crawling up her throat, looked elsewhere to distract her. From the corner of her eye she spied on Jon and Lady Melisandre talking outside her tent, tried to guess on the nature of Jon’s rapid hands and notched forehead, and then they stole into Lady Melisandre’s tent and Sansa heard nothing Pela said after that.

Five minutes passed and they didn’t come back out.

Ten minutes passed, and Pela asked Sansa a question she didn’t compute but nodded yes to anyway.

Fifteen minutes passed, and her goddamn stupid imagination colored in a picture of them together, of their legs and limbs meshing and she thought she heard moans emanating from there.

Twenty minutes passed, and the pinching in Sansa’s middle made her sicker and sicker every time she glanced at the unmoving tent.

Gods, the image wouldn’t leave her, ran its reel over and over again until Sansa wanted to drop everything and storm into the tent to prove it true or not true (not true, not true, please). Lady Melisandre was a beauty, no ifs, ands, or buts about it, but if that repugnant charlatan whispered pretty words laced with sorcery to get Jon into bed with her, if she touched him, if she thought Sansa would stand idly by while she seduced another king and tied him to her god, she—

Pela kicked Sansa’s feet out from under her.

Sansa pitched forward.

She managed to catch herself before she hit the mud, turned her ankle under and stumbled in a circle to regain her footing. Aja came to hover at her elbow, but Sansa brushed her off, a hand on her hip and glowering at Pela through her lashes. “How dare you,” she spat.

“How dare I?” Pela countered. “Where did your head go? Hmm?” She tipped her head, perked it to the side like a bird, all-seeing and all-knowing, and Sansa scowled at her, paced a line in front of her. “Never get distracted. If you’re distracted you’re enemy has time to recover, and you never let your enemy recover.”

Sansa had nothing to bite back on her tongue, because Pela was right. Her concentration snapped. She wandered, got distracted. Jon distracted her. There she was, learning to fight as much for him as for herself, wanting so badly to vanquish at least this worry, one of too many as he went to war for her, and she couldn’t block everything else out. He spoke to one person he had every right to talk to and interact with, and the sight made everything else extinct for Sansa.

What was wrong with her?

She switched the dagger from one hand to the other, wished it’d come with a matching scabbard if only to alleviate some of the weight straining her already worn arm. Lesson abruptly halted, her arms drooped, filled with legs and hanging at her side, brushing her legs which quaked, ready to buckle. “Let us break for the day,” she suggested. “I’m tired.”

“Battle doesn’t care if you’re tired,” Pela dismissed with a snort. “Battle doesn’t stop because you’re tired.”

The scowl deepened on Sansa’s face. “I am the Lady of Winterfell,” she reminded Pela. “If I say I’m finished for the day, I’m finished for the day. I will not discuss this further.”
Pela arched a disinterested brow. “We’re not in Winterfell,” she retorted. “And you’re not my lady.”

A chuckle hit Sansa’s ear, and a poorly disguised one at that. She threw a withering glare over her shoulder, pinned Aja and the other woman down and dared whichever one of them to do it again. Her current mood did not favor being laughed at; any other she could roll her eyes, slide it off her back and think nothing of it until she lay in darkness that night, but right then…no.

The woman pointed her the other direction, however, to her right and someone attempting to smother another chuckle under a cough. Sansa whipped her head that way, red hair flying, same color as her tide turning for the worse, and—

Oh.

Jon.

He surfaced from the tent. Finally. No worse for the wear, no hair out of place, not a stain on his clothes or smudged lip color to his pale skin. Thank the Gods, thank the Gods, Lady Melisandre didn’t have him. Relief overwhelmed Sansa so fervidly she wanted to cry, could breathe past the boulder on her chest and move without burden on her shoulders.

What was this?

Arms crossed over his chest, Jon’s lips pulled high when Sansa’s eyes alighted on him, all the way up to his eyes, positively combusting at the sight before him, poniard in her hand and exertion blooming roses on her cheeks. She blushed harder, heart fumbling, staggering, thumping about in its cavity, there that swelling again (what was this, what was this?).

She scraped a hand over her mussed hair (which she now regretted not plaiting in her eagerness to get outside), and Jon chuckle-coughed again, swiping a finger under his nose in an even poorer attempt to mask it. A smirk quirked her lips.

She slinked up to him. “Are you laughing at me?”

“No, my lady,” Jon said, schooling his face until nothing but a fond smile was left. It nearly stopped Sansa in her tracks; she hadn’t seen such adoration directed at her, wholly for her and because of her, since Father, she realized. None of her husbands looked at her in such a manner, and Petyr certainly didn’t. He and Lady Melisandre snaked about much the same in that way.

Sansa pulled herself up short before she tumbled into the thought anymore. “I’d be careful laughing at me if I were you, my lord.”

“Is that so?”

She moaned, loved that they were near the same height and therefore at eye level so she could every twitch of reaction as she playfully threatened, “I might just clip off your hair in your sleep.”

His smile slipped. She almost giggled and scampered off, a girl again and teasing her mischievous side, enacting her brothers’ comeuppance for their pranks.

But then movement beyond Jon’s shoulder caught her eye, and time dragged to a stop. Her relief froze, her playfulness dried up, and her joy, it dripped to the ground, plunged off a precipice and exploded at the jagged bottom. Sansa wished she were cleaved so that only a part of her had to stay trapped in this reality and the rest of her could go on blissfully unaware.

Because there stood Petyr, extirpator of everything, trading his riding gloves for a more stately
choice. Sweet little Robin Arryn never-so-sweet and not-so-little-anymore danced excitedly beside him, spinning in circles to see absolutely everything, the chance to witness a wildling encampment not to come again. Sansa hoped he remembered the slap she delivered to his cheek when he finally noticed her.

To hells with it. Why delay the inevitable?

Sansa knocked shoulders with Jon a bit more harshly than intended, put herself between him and the snake, vile, vile, heinous viper of a man. “What are you doing here?” she all but screeched. Charged Petyr and Robin Arryn and Yohn Royce behind them, let the Knights try to defend their sniveling lord before she has her claws on him.

“I received your letter,” Lord Baelish said calmly, the perfect example of absolute composure. Sansa squeezed the dagger in hand. “I’m relieved you’ve come to your senses about winning this war.”

“No one here sent for you,” she growled.

“No?”

One little swipe, one little slash in his throat, no more than a nick, that was all it’d take to put him down before he embedded his fangs in them. Petyr was close enough, she could do it. But then Jon murmured her name, snagged her arm in his cold vise and held her back, kept her from doing what she wanted, what he knew she wanted.

Please, let her, please, please.

“Don’t,” he whispered in her ear, “please.”

Sansa looked at him. At his hand. At him again. Staring, ice flooded her insides, its avalanche tumbling over her, burying her underneath. “You said yes?” she managed, shaking her head not true, not true. Jon wouldn’t stab the snow and mean to land the knife in her back by calling on a man who masqueraded his monster so well he fooled everyone but her. Jon wouldn’t.

But his silence answered otherwise.

She ripped herself free from him, and was glad her tears blinded her to the way he flinched, to his hurt. It made it easier to spit back at him. “How could you do that? Why didn’t you tell me?”

The tears ran hot down her cheeks. She couldn’t slap them off fast enough, wiped and wiped and ducked her head to avoid anyone seeing as she stormed back to the tent, but the water dripped onto her dress and everyone would see that, tempted her to run, run faster. Finally the combative wind froze the tears, burned them to icicles on her chin, and Gods, those hurt too, shattered too easily at her touch.

Just as she shattered too easily.

Why did she still feel so damn breakable?

Why could Jon break her easiest of them all?

Sansa yanked the tent folds into place behind her and scrambled to tie them together, but seconds later the flaps were torn from her hands. Jon shouldered his way in and Sansa took a step back for every one closer he came to her until her thighs hit the war table. She latched onto its edge, dagger clanking noisily. Jon stopped.
This time as harsh as she intended, she said, “I don’t want to talk to you.”

Jon breathed deeply, in and out, deep and drawled. Sansa had come to recognize that sound, those long pulls of air; while his new temper got the best of him once or twice, he was at least learning to reign it in and control it. “Sansa, if you would just listen—”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“If you don’t want to talk to me then you don’t have to! I will talk and you will listen!”

She waited, sucking the tears down and the damn neighboring lump in her throat and curling her toes in her boots and digging her nails in their familiar crescents in the wood. Waited. Waited. Commence the truth, she wanted to scream, tell me why. She opened her mouth to unleash it, to scream and wail, but Jon…

He cupped her face in his hands, dousing all that fire. “You are going to die,” he said. And, “I am going to die,” and Sansa shook her head, fire gone but water bursting anew. “Even with the smaller noble houses we don’t have enough men to win. And when we lose Ramsay will hunt you down and he will kill you, and I can’t let that happen. I can’t.”

“It won’t happen,” she whimpered. “We don’t need Lord Baelish’s army.”

“We do. You know we do.”

Jon dropped his forehead on hers and Sansa squeezed her eyes shut as more tears gushing out.

He was right. Of course he was right. She prioritized her selfish reasons for being unamendable to the alliance before the lives of the thousands of men who’d fight her war, and Jon, he didn’t. Jon thought of those men and the women and children who waited for them at home, who sat at their windows and watched for their return. He thought of Sansa and what a loss would mean for her, both in life and in death. Only last did he think of himself. And that was why he was their leader; he was why scores of men ran at death for him.

Jon Snow altruistically aligned himself with Petyr Baelish to save them. To save her.

How did she miss that? How could she deny that?

“I promise you, Sansa,” he said, drawing back and thumbing away her tears, “when all of this is over and we’re on Winterfell soil again, I will bring you whomever head you want. I will give you Lord Baelish’s head if that is what you desire.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?” she implored. “I asked you to talk to me, Jon. So why didn’t you?”

“You were so cross with me for just considering the offer. How would you have hated me if you knew I said yes?”

Sansa grappled onto words, but nothing croaked out. Hate was a strong word used in this context, for she didn’t know if she could hate him, didn’t have the energy to add another person to that infernal list. She was disappointed, maybe. Upset, definitely. But hate?

“I don’t hate you for what you did, Jon,” she said. “I hate how you went about it. You should have told me. If you’d given me at least a little notice he wouldn’t have blindsided me so. You let him catch me off guard, and now he’s seen for himself that you didn’t warn me of his arrival.” She skimmed her hands along his fur collar. “That is something he will use to divide us, Jon. We have enough enemies; I don’t want you to be one of mine.”
“I don’t want that any more than I want you to be mine. I’m sorry I did not tell you. But I didn’t know if they’ve even come.”

“But they did,” she amended.

“But they did,” Jon echoed. “I’m sorry.”

He brushed a lock of hair behind Sansa’s ear, fell his hands over the cap of her shoulder and kept going. All the way down to her hands. He launched on his toes to kiss her forehead and there bloomed a smile. They were stronger like this, Sansa knew, not preying on each other’s trust but extensions of one another and no hell able to break them. If only they could stay like that for an eternity.

But, “Shall we go welcome our new guests?”

Sansa shook her head, nibbling on her lip. “I’m not ready to…face Lord Baelish just yet. But you go,” she urged. “It’s a Lord Commander’s duty.”

Jon could have argued that it, too, was the responsibility of the lady of the house to greet any visiting nobleman and therefore inappropriate for her to shirk such a duty, thus guilting her into accompanying him, but he didn’t push the matter. “Join us when you’re ready,” he said, another kiss to her head and waiting for her to nod before he reluctantly detached from her.

Ghost trotted in at that moment, panting happily. He rubbed his face in Jon’s wool cloak, cleaning his snout rimmed in what looked like fresh blood. Sansa wrinkled her nose and then rumpled her pretty face even more when she whiffed the keen stench of whatever the direwolf killed and feasted on.

Nonplussed, Jon scratched Ghost between the ears and instructed, “Stay with Sansa.”

Obeying, Ghost pushed his nose in her hand and Sansa jerked, balling her hands under her chin. “I am not touching you,” she said. She’d never heard him make a sound, as invisible in silence as his master, but she almost expected him to as he laid on the ground, head on his paws.

“I reckon you’ve hurt his feelings,” Jon observed.

“I’ll make it up to him,” Sansa softly promised. Put a wet rag to his fur, work out the mud, and scrub off the blood, and he’d be as good as new. As fleecy as Lady. Lady. She hadn’t thought that name in some days. “What did you speak with Lady Melisandre about earlier?”

Jon answered, “Nothing of importance. I inquired if she’d seen our victory in the flames.”

“And?”

“Vague as always. Her visions are not as impressive as she likes to believe they are.” Sansa smiled. He was intact more than physically, then. Apprehension right where she knew and wanted it to belong. “Either way, we have other matters to concern ourselves with. How the Glovers and the ironborn will react to each other, for instance.”

She hummed and sighed wistfully, “And Petyr Baelish.”

Sansa was right to be wary of Petyr, to admit their tangled history as a warning and steel herself accordingly.
For two days he watched Jon with the gross calculation Lady Melisandre rapely watched her with, and when Sansa realized they were one in the same, two sides of the same coin, she had to wonder what, exactly, they were being measured to. To more than who they once were, brand new and bright-eyed and naive. To more than their past transgressions. And certainly to more than Catelyn Tully and a mythical savior never transcribed to scripture.

But if that be the case, Sansa tided her time alone hoping Petyr saw Jon as the spitting image of Father and she of Mother. Gods forbade it, she hoped the past caught up to his future and he lost yet another supposed love of his life to better man.

The cruelty of that thought didn’t even faze her.

In the mean time she kept to her lessons. Not in the relentless frame of the first and not like Brienne and Podrick’s arrangement, but somewhere in the middle. Somewhere she had time, between council meetings and fielding ravens and doing what little she could to increase provisions for the battle not five days away. More replies arrived every day and for every yes collating their army, the lords and ladies on the paper prospected the battle plan, needed to know their marks in the ground and what song to listen for in the air.

Finally, Jon and Sansa could give that.

As always, Jon was discreet with his emotions about their gaining numbers. He zipped his lips up tight, refused to utter either word lest it jinx them, lest something tragic befell them between now and then. But it popped into Sansa’s head the day before they meant to march for Winterfell. Popped in like we can win as she returned a raven to its home.

She tipped her head back as the raven soared, no godswood to pray at the roots of but an open sky scattering its clouds to hear her invocation, and it felt right, using those words.

It felt true.

The houses favored them, the numbers were theirs and the best at their command, and they could win. They would win.

Jon wouldn’t hear it. Arrogance was a malevolent, contagious thing and not a trait he wanted infecting his troops, forbidding Sansa from sharing her optimism beyond the boundaries of the war table. The smallest cocksure devil garbled a person’s vigilance, and because Jon wanted her to enrage the heart, not ignore it, he insisted she add him to her roster of instructors.

She hardly fought his effort; confining Jon to their tent for extra lessons appeased her just fine. So long as it got him out from under Petyr’s gaze.

“Operate in reverse grip as much as you can. You have a faster strike and better recovery,” Jon testified at the start of their third session, “among its other advantages. Watch my elbow as I thrust.”

The dagger he borrowed from a wildling in camp had dimensions better suited for Sansa, the blade long and the attenuated hilt disappearing in his hand, but he denied her suggestion of trading weapons, said she needed to become accustomed to hers. As he thrust – seventh direction, Sansa noted – his bent elbow straightened, driving at her chest.

“See my elbow? One problem with forward grip is that the elbow telegraphs your every direction change, making you predictable. But in reverse grip…” He rotated his wrist consequentially. “Attack me.”
Sansa drove her dagger at him, an ice pick maneuver into his shoulder. Jon hefted his arm up to block her, but she twisted at the last moment, met his arm with her left and jabbed his open chest with her right. She grinned, and Jon grinned back, dropping his arm.

“Feel that? Your opponent can’t predict where you’ll go in reverse grip because the entire body moves with you. You can fool just about anyone,” Jon said.

“Fool?” Sansa caroled. “I’m not that terrible.”

“I did not say you were terrible.” Her brows jumped to her hairline, and Jon laughed, twirling the dagger to rest the blade on his shoulder. “A man at the Wall told me that older generations don’t respect anyone who uses forward grip. They believe it means their opponent is a greenboy. So even if you were terrible – which you aren’t – fighting in reverse grip fools them otherwise.”

“Mayhaps I should use forward grip, then. Be a right trickster,” Sansa teased, flourishing the last word with twinkling fingers.

Jon shook his head, and there it was again, a smile. He brooded much too much and the way they transformed his face, Sansa wanted to keep him smiling for the rest of her life. She might have once had throne contention in her sights, ambitions questing south for golden importance, but beautiful things like that, like daydreams and gold, lost their shine long ago.

Or she thought. Jon was beautiful. Smiling or not smiling, now she looked at him.

When did her affections deepen so?

“Lord Commander Snow. Lady Sansa,” a voice floated through the tent walls. The voice belonging to Podrick, waiting outside for Jon’s invitation to waddle in, anxiously tugging on his frayed cuffs. “Pardon my interruption,” he said, spitting glances behind him, “but Lord Howland Reed and his bannermen have arrived.”

Sansa blinked, perplexed. “Greywater Watch has bannermen?” she questioned. Though, perking an ear, the camp did sound abnormally inflamed. Rowdy, almost.

“They’re mudmen, my lady,” Podrick clarified. “Several dozen in his entourage.”

“It doesn’t matter what they are,” Jon sheathed the knife and set it aside, on a corner of the map not governed by stones. He buried Sansa’s dagger under her pillow and picked up his brigandine with a single finger, fastening it to his body. “Show Lord Reed in, please, Podrick.”

The squire sputtered. “But, my lord, what do we do with the mudmen? They’re…” and the words were lost to him, struggling his tongue. “Uncouth, to be polite.”

“We thought the same of the free folk at first,” Sansa reminded him. Podrick bowed and exited, and when his footsteps melded into the others Sansa turned to Jon. “I can’t believe he came.”

“Better late than never,” Jon remarked, buttoning up his collar. “What do you reckon he’s like?”

Sansa couldn’t begin to guess. Howland Reed was a fixture in Father’s stories, a hero in so many of them that the walls recognized his name as they recognized Robert Baratheon or Rhaegar Targaryen. He was her brothers’ favorite, they bouncing eagerly in their beds for Father to tell them again – and again and again and again – of the Raid on the Tower of Joy. And while the story wasn’t Sansa’s favorite, lacked happy endings and wasn’t bathed in romance, she understood its sway.

Eddard Stark built a statue of Howland Reed in their home, built him as tall as a mountain.
What were they to expect of the flesh and bone model? Of his formations?

(Or anyone’s?)

True to his tallness, Lord Reed came at them booming.

“Jon Snow,” he cried, a flush draining down his unlaced tunic that had nothing to do with the nipping winter. Swishing his sandy-blond hair out of his light green eyes, he clumped over to Jon and Sansa, bashing his hip into the war table on the way, and immediately cupped Jon’s hand. “My, my, my, my, my. Look how you’ve matured.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Lord Reed,” Jon said. “Your rescue at the Tower of Joy was my favorite story growing up.”

Lord Reed snorted. “I’d hope so. I—”

His gaze slid to Sansa. Though it was nothing like Petyr’s ossified diligence, the sudden attention jarred Sansa, made her uncomfortable and in an ill state, and she couldn’t quite say why. Then Lord Reed bowed. Sighed her name. And as he stood she smelt the pungent ale on his breath, and that was why; women only received danger when in the cylindered attention of a thoroughly-scotched man.

“You have your mother’s eyes. Her hair. Her…everything, actually,” Lord Reed said, then muttered to himself, “I adored your mothers.”

Sansa smiled, championing her ease despite his foul stench. Rot stench. This was the man Father indebted his life to? “I’m pleased Jon’s letter reached you, Lord Reed.”

The man’s eyes flitted to Jon and then back to Sansa. “You sent a letter my way?”

“Yes, ser. By raven, more than a fortnight ago.”

He giggled, a sort of gurgled lilt choking deep in his throat. “Messenger-ravens rarely find Greywater, my lady,” he told her. “I received no letter.”

His undiminished giggling lofted him off balance, wavered him unsteady on his feet, and he made a mad scramble for the table. Stones scattered and a fleck of the map tore off, and those sounds enough startled Jon and Sansa, spurring Jon a foot forth. Lord Reed laughed at his own clumsiness, shooed Jon and rolled his shoulders back with a long swig of air.

Jon wasn’t so assured by his boneless legs, exchanging a tempestuous look with Sansa. “Then why are you here, Lord Reed?” he asked carefully. “The crannogmen are not known for marching into open combat.”

“When my son told me of your father’s wrongful execution I vowed to deliver support to Edd one last time. My children left to protect your young brother, Brandon, beyond the Wall not long after, but I’ve waited for the right opportunity. Fighting for your birthright, Sansa Stark, is that right opportunity. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.”

“You’re joining our army?”

Lord Reed confirmed as much, hedging, “If mudmen are welcome in your barracks.”

“Of course you’re welcome, Lord Reed,” Sansa said. “You and your bannermen will be great
additions to our army.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

“Let me introduce you to a few of our other lieutenants,” Jon said, clapping Lord Reed on the shoulder and steering him away from the table. Away from the tent, in general, keen to prevent further damage. “You’ve arrived in time for our last war council meeting.”

Cracks webbing his stone, wine smoking his breath, his fissures were not what they were expecting. They weren’t expecting him to be so broken.

Was that who they’d be? Was he their future after a long tenure of war?

Jon conducted the last war council meeting without Sansa present, per her instruction and he obliging forthwith. She didn’t need to be there, she said, all her contributions given and men more responsive to other men anyhow. Nor did she want to be there, for that matter, the less time sharing space with Petyr and compact air with Lord Reed the better.

She dawdled longer than was necessary, assisted the wildlings’ decampment and trooped the food and fire stores (as complete as could be in the realm’s bitter temperament) to the tunnels beneath Mole’s Town. It’d been Jon’s idea to cache them underground earlier than plotted; with Ramsay’s scouts scouring the land and their army marching south on the morrow, he wished to circumvent any casualties curated from a surprise ambush.

None were happy, took persuasion and promises they’d be fetched once the battle was done, but eventually they went. And Sansa was glad for it; parting them from the other armies was not only safer – less hostility between the factions, fewer rows and meager reasons for those rows – but it also tamed Jon’s restlessness, defined his focus.

When all was said and done, Willa’s arms detangled from around Sansa’s waist where she plowed into her as she meant to leave, Sansa trudged through the camp and tried not to think on how humorlessly empty it felt. How painfully empty it felt. She’d gotten so used to the wildlings and their ruckus: to their bluntness and the guffaws following every tall tale, to how the women gobbled like hens and how no one sat still for very long, a side effect of a transient life. They might’ve been overwhelming, inescapable, unbearable at first, but they filled every cranny of Sansa she bent herself to avoid.

She found madness enough with the lords, sure, but it wasn’t the same; somehow, at some undetermined point, she became more comfortable with wildlings than the man plated in shining armor.

“Sansa.”

Speaking of wolves in sheep’s clothing.

Petyr crossed the camp to Sansa, made a beeline right for her and snagged her in his crosshairs and she had nowhere to veer to, nothing to hide behind, stuck out in the open and susceptible. She cursed her rotten luck. Robin Arryn scampered to keep up with Petyr’s long strides, kicking up the snow and the slush, staining his shoes in a fashion that Petyr would cluck his tongue over later.
But now was not later and nothing distracted the man from Sansa or prompted him to deviate. Unfortunately. “Why do you not have an escort?” he demanded.

Candle fumes wafted off his mantle, the wind catching it and nearly pushing Sansa over with it. She set herself sternly. “As Lady Brienne will be with the rest of the army on the battlefield I insisted she attend the meeting you just left. Her squire was my escort, but he’s tending to the horses. Besides,” she hissed, looking the man up and down, “I’ve survived worse treachery than walking alone. You know that, Lord Baelish.”

Ever the consummate actor, he reacted flawlessly, murmuring, “Of course,” and slipping a conciliatory smile in place. He glanced down at Robin Arryn, up to his chin now, a mop of dark hair shadowing his beady eyes. Petyr squeezed his shoulder. “Go on back to camp and check on your falcon, my lord. I’d like to speak with your cousin a moment.”

A gleeful shine erupted in those eyes. He looked between the two of them, and Sansa forced on a smile to match Petyr’s, though privately she thought to tell him *stay*. Robin Arryn was as spoiled as she’d been once, as naïve too, and as the last one inflicted in the realm, it was high time to sully that naivety, to lift the veil and shout *boo*.

“Yes, Uncle Petyr,” he said before she could, turned and divorced the two Knights flanking them.

Petyr brought a scant few thousand Knights north with him, the rest ordered to stay south of Winterfell until Wun Wun sang their song, and each and every one of them encamped elsewhere. Shrouded in tree clearings or meadows wide enough to erect their blue and white tents. Very unlike Lord Reed’s forces, happily squatting in the wildlings’ dwellings.

But had Sansa expected anything else? Truly?

Robin Arryn out of range and on his mount, that genial smile of Petyr’s dripped to the ground, to her feet where she’d make him grovel if ever he wanted back in her good graces. “Sansa, my love,” he said, “know that I would never have left you with Ramsay Bolton if I’d known what he was or what he was doing to you.”

“Jon said the same thing,” Sansa mused, almost wistfully, and for a moment she lost herself in that memory, the sweetest of her life and the safest she’d felt since leaving Winterfell with Arya and Father. All of the sweetest and safest moments belonged in Jon’s company, by his lips and his hands and his chest she laid on and his heartbeat she loved as if his was what kept hers going.

Sansa shook herself from the reverie. “Jon said the same thing, but I believed him. I do not believe you,” she said. “Sell me your defenses if it pleases you, Lord Baelish, but know you’re speaking to deaf ears. You act in your self-interest. You always have, and you always will. Marrying me to Ramsay gave you a modicum of influence in Winterfell. Or at least the illusion of it. When I take back my home your ambitions for it ends.”

“I do hope you reconsider that,” Lord Baelish mentioned.

“Why?”

“Because a queen needs a king, as a king is nothing without his queen.”

Sansa repressed a snort, muffling it on crinkled lips pointed at the ground. She gave credit where credit was due; his wanton visions were indelible. “You waste your breath, Lord Baelish,” she stated.

“Our hearts do play games we know we cannot win, but I know you will never consent to be mine,”
he demurred, and another snort rose up. No, she would never. Once upon a time, yes, when her friends were few and his machinations were something she could hold on to. When Joffrey was a villain and his mother more so, and Tyrion Lannister was a kind if unsuitable husband to her dreams, and Petyr’s smoke screen wasn’t transparent to her yet.

Once upon a time, and a time she never wanted to go back to.

“Instead,” he went on, “I propose this: when your uncle, Edmure, passes away you will inherit the Riverlands—”

“He was married to a Frey the same night my mother and brother were murdered. I’m certain he’s fathered a child since then,” Sansa refuted.

Petyr smirked. “Easily eliminated,” he said. “Once you’ve inherited the Riverlands you’ll control that territory and the North. Marry Robin Arryn, Sansa, and you’ll have the Vale as well. You’ll control everything north of Casterly Rock.”

Marry…

Marry that lordling squirm? How –

A crannogman hustled up to Sansa right then, unintentionally saving her from an outburst and blessedly so. Petyr could command the boy hence, but he would not rile her or manipulate her hand. Rather, even if he did, she had to be sure not to show it. Slightly out of breath, the man extended a scroll of parchment to her. “This arrived while you were gone, my lady.”

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the scroll. The man gave a curt nod and lumbered off, and Sansa rolled it over in her hand, a finger catching in the hastily-tied twine. Red wax bled through the coarse paper, its residue staining Sansa’s fingers where she touched the wettest blotch, but just there, faintly, she made out the lines of a kraken.

Petyr craned forward, prying to solve the mystery of her correspondence, but Sansa crushed the scroll in hand and knotted it behind her back. Said to him, “I thank you for your army, sir, but for nothing else.”

She looped wide around him and quickened her pace to the tent.

Gods, her head spun. Eddied the world around her in a kaleidoscope, swirls and swirls she couldn’t straighten out, and in there was that boy’s face too, Robin Arryn’s, laughing as he pounced on her castle, laughing as he pushed someone through his moon door. She couldn’t conceive the idea, the idea of him and him with her, and when she did it felt like she may faint, may fall over, legs like jelly and blue spots dotting her vision. But her legs carried her.

Ghost lopped out to her, pushed his head in her head, and behind him strolled Jon, his arm lassoed around Lord Reed. But his eyes, they watched Sansa. For how long and what he saw, Sansa didn’t know, but she’d fret on it endlessly until she did, bunched a hand in Ghost’s fur and relied on him to keep her upright. Jon couldn’t see her like this. She didn’t want him to see her like this, so thoroughly unmanned by a silly, albeit infuriating, marriage proposal.

No, she had to be stronger than that. More formidable than that.

She was the Lady of Winterfell and soon-to-be Wardeness of the North. The Red Wolf.

She wasn’t a stupid little girl anymore.
Lord Reed swayed on his feet. The others were knee-deep in porter, battle fever buffeting the walls, uproarious and lushed and yes, of course, Sansa thought, hopping out of the pair’s way to avoid jumbling her feet under theirs or any other calamity that regularly felled tipplers.

She glanced down at the scroll in her hand. The kraken. The Greyjoys. Of their surroundings, Ser Davos and Brienne knew of the Iron Islands’ pending involvement and what they offered, and the name probably meant little to nothing to Tormund, but Lord Reed… They risked offending him.

Then again, gaze sweeping up as they passed her, it might not register with him in his current state.

“I confess, I had ul…ultttt…other motives for coming here,” she heard Lord Reed conspire to Jon. “I don’t know if you can win against a Bolton, but we have things to discuss, me and you.”

“And we will discuss those things, Lord Reed,” Jon said, easing the older man to a stop, hands clamping down on his shoulders. “I’ll have someone escort you back to your tent.”

Despite the green tint suffusing his cheeks, Lord Reed rebuffed the requesting, pushing Jon off him. He walked like a stutter, with a limp and a hitch, as shaky as a newborn colt, and Sansa thought to bark at someone – anyone – to see the man didn’t plant face-first in the mud on his way, didn’t suffocate in the thick sludge. But she did neither, didn’t demand it or chase after him herself, stood with Jon and monitored his progress across the camp until his back was a shadow and the lost differentiating sight of his head amidst the rest.

He reminded her of King Robert, actually. His visit to Winterfell the last time their lives were any good was the first and only time she ever witnessed the man, but she remembered the king as an excessive drinker. She overheard Mother and Father talking in their chambers the night before the royal procession departed for home, heard Mother complain how more than three-quarters of their wine store was gone and how the most responsibility lay in King Robert’s belly.

She wondered if Lord Reed could drink the king under the table, if he’d earned an alias like the despicable Whoremonger King back home, and then shook off the thoughts as quickly. No use pondering things that didn’t matter. “Will he be safe to ride tomorrow?” she asked.

“He’ll sleep it off,” Jon said, hoped. “Or pray the fresh air is sobering.”

“Why do you guess he drinks so much?” He shrugged helplessly. Sansa sighed, shriveling up in her cloak as a gust climbed up her ankles. “I suppose you can’t tell a man not to drink. It’d be like telling a bird not to fly.”

“And when you have to, you possessively adopt some sins to muddle the others.” Huddling closer to her, Jon’s hand found its place at the small of her back. Sansa hoped it wrapped further around her, explore anew on her waist, her hip. “What did Lord Baelish want?”

She rolled her eyes. “He proposed I marry Robin Arryn to secure the North and the Riverlands.”

Jon sucked in a breath, hissed up his nose. Sansa looked over at him and… Even if she lived millennia after millennia, if she had every word in the Citadel under her fingertips or a glimpse inside his head or if he burst different colors, she’d never be able to describe the meaning of his expression. Nothing could encapsulate it. Nothing would ever be right or come remotely close.

Sharper than hater but lighter than fury. A twitching jaw and a hand scraping over his head. Everything but his eyes hardened, and they were crusting over. Marred in shadow but emoting the most wrenching sorrow. Mourning. Regret.

For her.
And then it was gone.

“At least he didn’t offer himself as your husband,” he said, voice cracking and barely managing it.

“I don’t doubt he will if I decline a union with Lord Arryn,” Sansa said, “but he knows I’ll never consent. He made his knowledge of that clear.”

Jon kicked at a clump of snow, spraying the powder in front of them. Ghost bound off to sniff at it. “If you do decide to marry – and I’m not pressuring you to. You don’t have to. I think of any woman in the realm, after the husbands you’ve had, you should be exempt from marrying, but if you do… choose to…” And there was that look she loved so much, but amplified. Intensified. Like she was the sun he orbited around. “Don’t marry Lord Baelish.”

She shook her head. “There’s no danger of that.”

“Good,” Jon said, expression school impassively, but she saw it anyway. The smile that he bit down on. “You deserve better than him, I think.”

“I—”

“You two taking shits out here or something?”

They jumped apart.

His disembodied head poked out from between the drawn tent flaps, Tormund cackled, a bit manically and a bit wheezy. Sansa glared at him, sought to slap that grin pulling his lips up high, the one that flashed his chipped and yellowed teeth. He ruined it, shot Jon’s eyes to his feet and killed one of their few solitary moments. Didn’t let her finish, those few things she wanted to say feeling too real now she realized who she was about to say them to.

But the moment passed and Sansa couldn’t say those things.

(Not to Jon, anyway. She couldn’t give him back his family only to disfigure it with something like that. It’d make him regret her ever finding him. It’d make him hate her.)

(His intact honor never would hate her, so like Father in that regard. So much of him was like Father Sansa wondered how she never noticed it before. Brave and gentle and strong.)

Or could she?

In private, perhaps. Alone for a change. Not imposed on, like in Tormund’s presence, where they still were. Tormund who barked, “Get in here before you freeze your tits off,” and disappeared, the tent fluttering in his wake.

Advantageously alone again. Just the trees and the snow to listen in.

Sansa tried to broach the subject, to bid the words forward, opened and closed her mouth and opened it again, but nothing came out. Or spoke itself aloud. Or dared cross the boundary line. Since Jon gave her the poniard she had articulated and named that boundary line, stood on the very tip of one side and looked at Jon far on the other.

It’d be so easy to toe over the line, so easy for something else to come up behind her and shove her into the new demesne, but fear grasped hold and spun its roots up her legs. She was afraid of reading the line and admitting it aloud for the same reason Jon hesitated thinking positively on the battle because it was too colossal. Too titanic to put into words.
Maybe.

Friendship was paced with freedom and honesty and trust, she knew that. They were getting better at that. They’d shared their stories of woe with each other and identified every skeleton ghosting behind them, and if Jon could brace her rickety scaffolding, if he could pick up the tatters of her and still believe she was worth something after what she’d endured, then he could still love through this confession.

Right?

She spied him from the corner of his eye. What a picture she probably looked, gaping like a fish and chewing on her bottom lip, rubbing her arms and sparking the gooseflesh that pimpled her to the fingertips. He whispered her name, asked on her wellbeing. “Are you cold?” he said too.

Sansa shook her head. Not cold; nervous. She breathed in deep through her mouth. In courage, out nerves. In courage, out nerves. In courage, out nerves. She’d never know how much of a mess she made until she did. Until she said:

*Your talking to Lady Melisandre upset me.*

“I don’t know why,

“I don’t have to fret on him treating me like a lady, do I?”

*but I think it might be –*

“The free folk have no presumptions about who you are based on title or lineage. You can be unabashedly yourself without fear of reproach,” Jon intercepted, gaze letting go of her and traveling northeast to Mole’s Town. “Did everyone get settled alright?”

*Wait.*

“Yes,” Sansa managed. “There were some protest, but that’s to be expected, I suppose.” She swallowed thickly. Twisted her hair in a coil, spindling her finger in a strand, and shifted her weight from foot to foot, generating more courage, better courage. “Jon, I—”

“You are cold,” he said abruptly, turned to her and took the hitch in her breath as a yes. He steered her towards their tent, soft and encouraging, “Let’s go inside.”

*But…*

Sansa found the camp was not as completely shorn of its din as she thought, and where she mourned its loss several minutes ago, she now scorned its rage. Of those who lagged behind Tormund was the rowdiest, a wineskin tied to his belt and a cup he sloshed and splashed in his hand, tales more grossly exaggerated than normal. Ser Davos wasn’t far behind him, guffawing in all the right places, the merriest Sansa recalled ever seeing him.

It suffocated her, the sound, compressed her lips and incinerated her words to nothing. For another time, then.

On the other side of the table, Brienne tapped her cup while Lady Melisandre tepidly sipped the brew, playing as though she didn’t notice Jon and Sansa enter and instead engrossed in the conversation. But Sansa felt the Red Woman’s eyes tracing her over the guttering candlelight as she
melted into a rustled-up across from the woman. And so did Jon; tense and faltering, he swiped a cup and sat beside Sansa, wary of Lady Melisandre and Ser Davos’ loitering. Understandably; they weren’t the best company to loosen your tongue around, but personal discomfort wasn’t just cause to excuse them.

The wildlings bowled out infant otter skulls to make cups, the insides crisscrossed in scratches from the knives that scraped them clean. Of the six stationed around the table, only five drinks were fixed. Watching Tormund’s cheeks redden and Jon dragged his cup, Sansa harrumphed. She wasn’t particularly interested in drinking the porter (especially if it tasted half as bad as it smelled), hadn’t acquired a mature taste for it yet much as she hadn’t Cersei Lannister’s favorite Dornish red, but to be excluded on the very principal that she was a woman or a lady or Lord Commander Snow’s younger sister (likely) offended her sensibilities.

Hissing Brienne’s name, Sansa motioned to her cup, hands wrapped around the bone but neglected nevertheless. Without a preamble argument, the knight slid the cup to her, catching some dribble splattered from Tormund’s enthusiastic gesticulating and dragging the drops in long, ragged smears across the map.

Jon stilled Sansa’s arm as she reached for the cup. “It’s not worth the headache tomorrow,” he said, hushed and under his breath.

“Let the lady drink, Jon!” Tormund hooted.

“Yes, Jon,” Sansa cooed sweetly, crossing her leg under the table and purposefully bumping him, “let me drink.”

He relented, and she picked up the cup, swishing the brown liquid around. Her stomach groused as the swill hit her nose, uneased that it smelled even worse up close and first hand and not just because it was supplemented by foul breath. Tormund, however, knocked back the rest of his drink and leapt up before he fumbled backward, declared something of retrieving sour goat’s milk and marched determinedly out of the tent, leaving behind a cluster of confused and peculiar stares.

“Goat’s milk?” Sansa echoed.

“Don’t drink it,” Jon advised, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. “Whatever you do, however he sweet talks you, don’t drink it.”

“Taste like piss?” Ser Davos reckoned.

“Tastes worse than piss.”

A chorus of groans rounded the table, cups tucked close to chest and hands flattening over the tops. Sansa tossed the scroll onto the table; pulverized and effectively dented to the point the seal might’ve broken and it might not be intelligible anymore, it curved and rolled towards Jon until a nail snagged its end.

Jon scooped it up. “Who wrote you?”

“Lord Baelish intercepted me before I could read it,” Sansa admitted, “but it looks like House Greyjoy’s seal.”

“May I?”

At her nod Jon pulled the string apart. Sansa regarded the brew rippling in her hand and tried to contest whether it was meant to be drank cold. Or chilled, more like, her cupped hands powering it
with a dash of warmth. Petyr hadn’t allowed her any spirits on the road, called it unbecoming of a lady and shackled her in tea, and Mother only let her try wine the once. Tyrion had been generous with his wine stores, but she hadn’t been interested then, and when Ramsay happened to her…there weren’t enough ales and wines and porters and meads to survive Ramsay.

She survived him. She survived him. And even if fate lost her head in the coming days, that was cause to celebrate.

Gingerly, Sansa sipped the porter.

And immediately regretted it.

Had she been cold earlier, she wouldn’t be inflicted thereafter. A hot trail burned down her throat, rancid and scalding, like stuffed in a kiln. She gagged into her hand and tried to cough the fire back up, felt Jon’s hand instantly on her back and attempting to beat it. But the snake and all its fingers traveled down her body. Blasted through her chest. Slithered into her stomach. Pooled there in a great dripping pot.

Gods, the shit tasted like dirt and copper, like blood and tree bark and a little like fig.

It wasn’t bad. She nursed it some more.

Three sips later and she’d stopped coughing on every sip, but Jon’s hand had yet to stop. To leave. Peeking at him, Sansa found him smiling at her, his fingertips skimming the plain between her shoulder blades. “You alright?”

She nodded, shuddered. Jabbing an elbow into her knee, she hid her lips in her palm, though she fooled no one with such demur, apples of her cheeks unmistakably high. As colored with mirth, Jon’s hand escaped under her hair and grazed his knuckles along the back of her neck, to and fro.

No one else existed and none said a word to interrupt.

“The note is from the Greyjoys,” he said. “They made it to Torrhen’s Square and docked their armada in Blazewater Bay.”

Sansa moaned, leaning into him. Could say those few words she considered right there and then, how blissed out his touch made her. “Being as far inland as Torrhen’s Square guarantees they’ll join us—”

“Not definitively, my lady,” Ser Davos intoned.

A crease crimped her forehead. “How do you mean?”

“They’re as likely to reave your kingdoms when your backs are turned as they are to fight alongside you. The temperature of the people isn’t favorable towards the ironborn. Very few people in this world trust them, the northern lords and clansmen least of all, and I can’t say I fucking blame them.”

Even tipsy and tipping over, the man had a point. And a valid one at that, much to Sansa’s consternation. They’d cobbled together a ragtag army and she knew nearly every house waving banners for them on the battlefield carried some grievance with the ironborn or was somehow brutalized by their offhand culture of reaving and raiding and raping to a deplorable degree. By the manner in which they captured Deepwood Motte, Lord Glover was first in line to friendly-fire every gold and black flag he spotted.

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“Do not forget the Greyjoys have an invested interest in this particular fight,” Sansa reminded Ser
Davos. “They want Ramsay’s head on a spit just as much as I do.”

“That may be, my lady, but the only reason the ironborn are past Torrhen’s Square’s walls at this very moment is because they’d already forcefully possessed the castle.” Ser Davos tipped his head back and scratched his beard. “For now the ale’s subdued any distrust and distaste between the territories, but that won’t last once they learn of the ironborn’s involvement.”

“And if we send ravens preemptively informing them, we risk the houses abandoning us,” Jon said.

“But the other houses will find out regardless of whether it’s before the battle or not,” Brienne boasted.

Jon gripped the back of Sansa’s chair. “And they’ll demand blood for blood. An eye for an eye.”

“Which will rupture our fragile alliance with the Iron Islands,” Sansa finished, raking a hand through her hair. She sat back with a huff, and Jon traced patterns on her back, doodled circles and stars and lopsided hearts. “When we take back Winterfell and I’m Wardeness of the North, I’ll negotiate Torrhen’s Square back to its rightful house and demand atonement for any other malfeasance.”

“And if that doesn’t satisfy?” Ser Davos scouted.

Sansa shrugged, wiggling closer to Jon’s fingers. “It’ll have to.”

He snorted.

Tormund catapulted into the tent, skidding around the first trunk pillaring the roof over their heads and jingling a string of wineskins he’d multiplied by three in his disappearance. His grin, as crazed as the sour goat’s milk he shook in their faces, made Sansa cringe, stomach flipping over. Don’t drink it, don’t drink it, don’t drink it Jon said. She pressed her lips.

“Who wants some?” Tormund said, bouncing from person to person.

“No!” the table cried in unison.

Little offended wildlings, Sansa found. Insults were easily laughed at and slights were shrugged off. Tormund especially took his companions’ absolute shut down in stride, collapsing in his vacated chair once more and guzzling one wineskin dry. He tossed it behind him.

“They drank the hours to nothing. Until they didn’t exist. Sansa lost count of how many cups she imbibed, one pitcher spilled over then two, happily ensconced and sloshed and Gods, she couldn’t remember the last time she laughed so hard. Hard enough she doubled over in inconsolable silent laughter, hard enough a bit sprayed out her nose, dousing the end strands of her hair.

But she didn’t care, she felt so good. Better than good, better than fine, Jon’s lazy etchings on her back illegible, penmanship disintegrating in the bottom loop of the first A in her name, slightly below her shoulder blades and right where it tickled, tickled, and if this were her last night, if all the gods in all the lands snipped her heart string then at least she had this night. She had Jon and Brienne and Tormund and porter and at least she was happy.

She was happy. So happy. Why did Jon make her so happy? Why couldn’t she tell him he made her so happy?

No, no, loose tongue slippery tongue bad tongue, can’t say those things. True, yes, of course, hells, but, no. The gods reserved a special hell for women like her who thought things like that.
But she made him happy too. Right? All his smiles until then belonged to her and for her, and he
certainly improved on the frequency of those smiles, and as the table quieted for a beat longer than
before, hushing their mutual grumps of snake leech eel Littlefinger, Sansa felt tight with inaction.
Muscles bunching and heart wild in her chest.

The camp was silent all around them save for a few chatting birds and fires sizzling after being
kicked out, and yes, here, her chance come again, right here, right –

“And, Hells, that runt of his,” Tormund brayed.

Sansa smirked. He was a runt, Sweetrobin, as tempestuous as his lunacy mother and as sniveling as
his farce of an uncle. Just the other day he’d tried to goad Sansa into practicing with him, fighting
that was, still buffed in fool’s gold importance that he could defeat anyone who was smart enough to
toe in front of him. She should’ve if only to show him what life was like without a moon door to kick
his enemies through or a mother to cry to.

(Tormund took a whack at him in her place and that was as entertaining.)

“Yes,” Brienne hummed, cracked her thumb then the rest of her knuckles in one fell swoop, “he’s a
bit…”

Sansa didn’t struggle for words. “Spoiled? Obnoxious? Petulant?” she supplied readily, poising the
cup at her lips to nurse. “I despise that boy,” she sang. “I slapped him once and I’ll do it again.”

Jon’s hand stilled on her back, nails mid-rake. “You slapped him?”

“Right across the cheek,” she clarified, wallop in the air in a quick but unwarranted demonstration.
Jon blinked at her, gaze prickling fuzzy at the edges, stunned and disillusioned and no, wrong way,
don’t look at her that way, wrong way wrong way. Sansa stomped her foot indignantly. “He
destroyed my snow castle.”

“Fuck, woman,” Tormund rasped, burping laughs and then moving on to his second wineskin, “I
think I love you.”

“There you are, Lady Sansa,” Lady Melisandre intoned, the first Sansa had heard her speak during
the revelry, “we’ve located you a husband.”

Red bloomed deep in Sansa’s cheeks. The table laughed, did so courteously, but Sansa didn’t miss
how Jon’s eyes narrowed at the woman. How his glare drilled into her from across the tent. Thank
the gods, Sansa steadily breathed. Thank the gods there was no love lost between the two. Thank the
gods there wasn’t anything to worry about there. Thank the gods she got all worked up those few
days ago for nothing.

Thank the gods for porter.

“You’d make a finer husband than Littlefinger,” she commended, squishing the name in the dirt of
her throat and nabbing Jon’s attention. For a second, anyway, before he flicked a glance at
Tormund’s wagging brows.

“How many in our army?” he asked Ser Davos, cast back in his chair and drumming his fingers
cooly.

“Everyone?” Jon nodded. Ser Davos tipped his head back and tented his fingers in his lap, hissing
through his teeth. He roughly estimated: “Fifty from House Caulfield, sixty-two from Bear Island,
eighty-one from House Ashford, one hundred and forty-three from House Mazin, two hundred
Hornwoods, five hundred free folk and five hundred from Castle Cerwyn. Six hundred from House Glover, twelve hundred from House Reed. Fifteen hundred Knights of the Vale marching with us tomorrow and the other eighty-five hundred waiting south of Winterfell.”

Tormund snorted, decided, “You’re not pissed enough if you can remember that.” He reached over to pour his wineskin in Ser Davos’ empty fourth cup, but Ser Davos hastily slapped his hand over the top.

“Did Lord Baelish not pledge eighteen thousand Knights of the Vale to you?” Brienne wondered aloud. “Why are only ten thousand available?”

“Because,” Sansa sighed, “that is how Petyr operates.” She drained her cup to its end, licked a drip from her thumb. “He gives the least he’s able and retains the rest for himself. That way you’ll come back and ask him for more, further indebting you to him.”

“Do you intend to place him on the battlefield, Lord Commander Snow? Neither he nor Lord Arryn are talented fighters.”

Of everyone Sansa clandestinely repositioned as knights flanking Jon during the battle, his closest reinforcements and shields to do everything in their power to bring Jon home to her, Brienne had issued her argument most vigorously. She’d made her vow to Sansa, to serve and to protect her, not a former brother of the Night’s Watch and a noble’s bastard to boot, she asserted.

Using as few incriminating words as possible, Sansa braided together their fates: there was nothing worthwhile in the world without her and nothing to keep her in the world without him.

Perhaps a shameful answer, but a true one.

Jon folded his arms on the table. On their sight, Sansa realized his hands hadn’t returned to her. Weren’t sketching or doodling on her pale canvas, retracted for no reason she thought of. She tried not to wilt to a moue about it, but.

Really, it was for the best. She shouldn’t miss his hands so much. Or at all. What kind of lady reveled in her brother’s touch? What kind of lady missed her brother’s hands on her?

(The kind of lady who wanted things she shouldn’t. A Cersei Lannister kind of lady.

Shameful indeed.)

“Lord Baelish and Lord Arryn will be secreted in the camp with Sansa,” Jon responded matter-of-factly.

Sansa blanched. Sputtered. Gaped at Jon. Gripped her cup taut in hand. In the camp with Sansa, in the camp with Sansa, Gods, it rang loud in her ear, booming and banging like cannons puncturing the air. Pulverized as cannons did, too. She broke open, and water poured out. “Jon, I never agreed to that.”

A hand landed on hers, soft spoke her name, but she scrambled out of her seat. “You’ll not stash me underground like some pirate’s treasure. And certainly not in Littlefinger’s company,” she exclaimed.

Pacing short lines, she heard Jon’s chair whine, alleviated of his weight. “Leave us,” he ordered the others.

They were slow to move, the four of them. Taking their cups and wineskins, they bid their goodnights and filed from the tent, heads bent but spying on the figures from the corner of their eyes
like one would spy on an enemy or melt into the wall in the midst of a public disturbance. They hopped and diverted around Sansa, the alcohol gone to her head, didn’t know what she was blustering, woozy in thought and short in temper, conflicted and combative and easily induced to both.

She should hate him, hate him hate him hate him, so willing was he to always leave her alone. How could he when she could hardly bear it?

The tent emptied and their friends retired, voices faded entirely, Sansa bumped into Jon chest-to-chest on a turnaround. “You gave me that poniard so that I may protect myself. Does that include protecting against Lord Baelish when he elects to be less of a gentleman than he already is?”

“You use that dagger against anyone you have to,” Jon told her. “But I’ll station reserves to guard you. I promise you, Sansa.”

“What will that matter? He stole me once, in front of a whole wedding reception. What’s to stop him from doing it a second time?”

“Me,” he answered, so earnest it pained her. “I’ll give you a hundred men. Two hundred. I don’t care how many I have to remove to the camp.”

“We need every man available to us,” Sansa argued. “You can’t sacrifice worthy soldiers for a sentry position.”

Jon seized her arms. Not hard or violently or intended to bruise, but the alcohol fueled him as well, made him visceral. Intense. Passionate. “Haven’t you been listening, Sansa? You’re the future Queen of the North. I’d sacrifice my own life to keep you safe.”

She brought a hand up to her forehead, kneaded her temples where it began to pulse. “No one has to sacrifice their life,” she said, “because I’m going with you.”

“No, you are not,” Jon rebuffed, punctuating each word, the tightness in his voice informing her he’d not be swayed, moved, or coaxed otherwise.

“Why not?”

“Because if I die you’ll bring me back. You’ll have Lady Melisandre resurrect me again and… I can’t, Sansa.”

Sansa deflated in his arms. Her fight perished and her voice went with it, stunned to silence that he… that he… How could… “You believe I’ll only want that if I see you die?” she managed in a whisper, choking on the tears sprung forth. She cupped his face in her hands, stroking a thumb over his thick scruff. “Jon, I love you.”

There it was. Love. Finally, a name for the flutters in her stomach, for why she craved Jon’s eyes on her and envied his audiences with Lady Melisandre, and why she deemed it her life’s mission to make him smile, and why she missed his touch so desperately. The heat in her stomach had nothing to do with the porter, as her uncontrollable emotions had nothing to do with her moon’s blood.

Love.

*Love.*

What a word she never thought to use for him.
(She was scared to admit it, perhaps. People she loved left. People she loved died.)

She bowed her head, said to the ground, “If you don’t come back—”

“Do you want me to come back?” Jon shaved the slim distance between their bodies, his hands clutching her waist and his eyes contorting every way to meet hers. Plead for hers and she gave them up, stared at him with a wobbling chin and tears emblazoning her blue eyes brighter. She hated how tormented he sounded when he asked again. “Sansa, do you want me to come back?”

“How can you ask me that?” she breathed.

“That’s not an answer, Sansa.”

And she could not give him one; not in words, for they were lodged in her throat. She nodded, face crinkling as a tear spilled down her cheek, and Jon swept her up, her arms crushed between their bodies but what a way to soar. Sansa wondered if that was what it was like to be loved by him, as a woman and not a sister, if it felt like feet-off-the-ground soaring, high on elation to the point of habit-forming addiction.

She wondered if that was what it felt like to love and be loved in return.

“You must come back, Jon,” she pleaded in his ear. “I’ll be lost if you don’t.”

He gave no assurances, made her no promises, and while her joy stuttered she knew it was for the best. Sentiment did not protect a man from his fate, even if he was Azor Ahai or the prince that was promised or whoever the priestesses slated him to be, even if he was chosen and tested and true. Promises made the hearts they were pledge to feeble, ruptured by the smallest something. Employment of influence and power did so better.

Her cheek stiff with tears, Sansa’s feet touched the ground. A draft – colder by the deadened hour – twined around her ankles, but she paid it no mind, wove a finger in the soft hair on the back of Jon’s neck, in the tail he scraped it back in. She murmured his name, a hum passing through her in answer. “Can I ask something of you?”

“Yes.”

Content as they were, entangled as she’d rather they stay, she had to know: “Will you let me brush your hair?”

Jon’s arms loosened around her, slid along the bind of her waist and pushed on her hips. Reluctantly, Sansa drew back, but not without a last effort. “Please, please, please? It feels good, and I know my mother never did it for you.”

She crested her lips in a frown, lip plumped out and brows furrowed, exactly as when they were children. When Robb purloined her favorite doll and he and Theon volleyed it between them, extending it over their heads – until she rocketed as tall and the reach was no longer effective – and taunting her with it. When, instead of crying to Mother or Father, she sobbed into Jon’s arm.

He was as powerless to her pout now as he was then.

It broke her open in the widest fissure, a beam cutting her face in two. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she squeaked, bedecking his cheeks with her kisses. Jon rolled his eyes, but her last kiss aimed at his cheek caught the corner of his mouth.

Sansa snatched up his hand and skipped across the tent, crawled onto the pallet and pulled him in
after her. Whether powered by the innumerable cups of porter she inhaled or the result of finally resolving the itch to get her hands in his hair, she didn’t know, but the excitement of such a feat – for Jon was never one to preen, hated cutting his hair and bolted the other way the couple times she tried to practice braiding on him – thrummed through her. Perhaps too potently, could hardly sit still.

The pallet wobbled and cratered under her knees as she and Jon situated themselves, he at the foot of her bed and she behind him. A bolder her, an uninhibited and lover her, would’ve opened her legs and set him between them, would’ve wrapped them around his middle and hugged him flush to her, reveled in his hand light on her knees as hers dipped up and down his back that’d lost its boyhood softness.

But she refrained.

Retrieving the bone comb from her bedside and dropping it in her lap, Sansa unbound Jon’s hair, knotting the band he used on her wrist. His curls were surprisingly soft, not greasy like it looked or dry like winter parched but silky. Fleecy. “I like your hair,” she said, carding her fingers though his floss, shaking and fluffing and fanning it out.

“You used to badger me to cut it,” Jon reflected.

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

Unlike Arya, Sansa had always loved having her hair brushed, be it by a handmaiden or by Mother in a rare moment stolen away from her ladyship duties. Little compared to the feeling, to the secrets disgorged in confidence, to the sensation of the bristles meticulously running over her scalp and the glossy result. But, mostly, little compared to the mutual trust come with the task, to the delicate care the brusher showed the brushed in response to that faith.

Sansa had every intention of emulating that care. Sinking the teeth in Jon’s temple, she drew the comb back.

Tangles and snags gave way easily, from one side of his head to the other, her hand smoothing behind each stroke. She was marginally taller than Jon – a head on him, half of one if that – and thus their seating arrangement proved tiresome quickly, but she hardly noted the strain of lifting her arms after a time, so focused on her task. The discomfort was worth it, absolutely; the sound of Jon’s sigh and how he tipped his head back closer to her, the glimpse as his eyes fluttered shut, it was worth it.

But something niggled the back of her mind. Fisting the messiest bit in hand, and dragging the comb bluntly through the mass, she asked, with hesitance infiltrating her voice, “Jon, what you said earlier, about not wanting to be resurrected again…was that true?”

“Yes,” he said without any of the same reluctance. “Everything the pious men and women tell us about lights and life after death, they’re wrong. There’s nothing waiting for us. It’s cold and it’s dark.”

“Does that mean…” How to ask, she contemplated. How to ask. “Are you…are you afraid of dying?”

Again he said yes. He tipped his back to the point his neck would snap, ripping the comb from Sansa’s hands and leaving it dangling in his shag, and stared up at her. “Don’t tell anyone.”

Sansa shook her head vehemently. “Not a soul,” she swore. “But how are you doing? Aside from…that.”

“Why do you ask?”
“Has anyone?” She wrung her hands in her lap. “You were murdered, Jon. And then brought back to life. And now we’re about to go to war and you might die. I don’t know if anyone’s asked you how you’re handling all of this, so I’m asking.”

Not for the first time (but every time astonished her) Jon struggled for words. He fell back further, the cut of his neck perfectly aligning in the juncture of hers. Then: “Sometimes at night, when the camp’s quiet like it is now, I think maybe I should’ve stayed dead. That they should’ve left me in the dark. But then I look at you, Sansa. And you’re like a fucking elixir, making warm everywhere the dark deadened me. I look at you and I’m not so cold anymore.”

How did he expect her to breathe? To put peace in her heart and in her stomach? Confessions like that...

To Sansa there were hundreds of ways to be courageous; it took courage to smile placidly at an enemy, to lie or do something you disagreed with, to pardon a life who’s wronged you or to be the one to swing the sword. There was the courage it took to run raging at war and there was the courage it took to reveal your heart truthfully.

Jon had the courage Sansa did not.

Perhaps it’d find her in time for the battle.

It did not.

It did not find her the next day, waking tucked under Jon’s chin several minutes before he roused or tacking her mare next to his colt as they mounted the Kingsroad or any time after the alcohol haze wore off, the rock and the lull long enough to right the words in place.

Or the day after that, still trudging towards home, felt like sloughing at times, the snow thick on the trail, the infantry sinking and the horses sinking, one pack mule up to its knees and wouldn’t go any further, took Jon and Tormund and two more men to push it on.

Or the day after that, late into the camp constructed ahead of their arrival, all of Sansa aching and heavy and craving sleep, but there was too much left to do – trenches to dig, horses to groom, lords to confab with – and no sleep on the frozen horizon until Sansa demanded Jon to bed.

Or the morning after that, so many chances walking away from her until there were none left, an unaware Jon leading a fraction of their forces to the hills above Winterfell for their first look at the castle and the fires blazing in its fore.

Five fires.

Five saltires.

A body rigged to each.

“Lord Bolton’s burned one a day since we crossed into his demesne,” Ser Davos stated gravely on Jon’s left. He shifted restlessly in his saddle, twisting the pommel, scratching his head, and behind them Sansa heard him infect the thick band of archers, a shudder sweeping palpably through them.

The sun cleared the trees and the wind changed course, and in one fell swoop the scene came sharply
into view. Turned inside out and crucified inverted, the mutilated bodies were skinned to the muscles, leaving the flames ravage the little that was left. Blood drained from them, slathering the stakes and congealing in dense puddles around the brush, on the brush.

If the sight didn’t churn the stomach of everyone who witnessed it then the smell certainly would, burning flesh and blood and feces and smoke sticking like tar to their noses. It wasn’t a new odor for Sansa, for Ramsay’s delight sneaked up from the dungeons and adhered to the founding bricks of Winterfell’s ground floor. For he brought it to the chambers with him and played on her like a voodoo doll, cutting and burning and bruising and bloodletting her stubborn Stark.

The foul perfume was the smell of a raided Winterfell, and Sansa prayed scrubbing would exterminate it.

“Why’s he burn them like that?” Tormund asked. Bookending the line to the left, he craned forward over his horse’s neck and peered at the rest of them. “Why’s he burn them upside down?”

“It’s so they die slower,” Brienne explained from Sansa’s right. “The blood rushes to the head and keeps them conscious.”

“And so they’re closer to the fire,” Ser Davos said.

So it’s the only thing they see, Sansa added to herself. So it’s the last thing they see. “Do we know who they’re burning?”

Ser Davos shook his head. “That I cannot tell you, m’lady. They could be commoners,” he guessed. “They could be staff of your former household.”

Ramsay wouldn’t kill peasants, Sansa wanted to object. Peasants, commoners, lowborn, there was no advantage to killing them or using them as bait. And he’d lose the support of his bannermen if he asked for their sacrifice. But Rickon… He’d use Rickon as bait, would toy with him and toy with them, wouldn’t forfeit his only bargaining tool by executing the boy right off the bat, right in front of them.

Which left who?

“Whoever else he has captive will be in the dungeons,” she speculated.

“And Rickon?” Jon sussed out, seemingly on the same wavelength of thinking their brother was safe, if for now. Until they backed Ramsay into a corner. “Where would Ramsay keep him?”

“The crypt. He’d lock Rickon in the crypts as foreshadowing of where he’ll end up when we lose,” Sansa boasted.

In a cacophony of clinking armor and mail, weapons beating shields, the host at their backs parted down the middle. Podrick galloped hard through the fissure, pumping the reins, kicking up dirt in a clatter of hooves. The other horses in the line threw up their heads, knocking against each other as he jerked his horse to a full stop.

Out of breath and red-cheeked, he announced, “They’re marching this way.”

No sooner had he spoken the words, Ramsay and his army rose up over the opposing hill. The front line crested and then halted. There he was, the nightmare bigger than Sansa’s dreams. The demon bigger than her imagination, bigger than wild tales.

A pair of riders broke free of the others and sailed down the hill towards them. Ramsay rode on the
right, black hair flopping, and reflexively, Sansa touched a hand to her poniard – which she named Houndstooth after Jon vetoed Night’s Watch (“The sour memories of that place outweigh all the sweet ones.”) and White Mare (“You haven’t named your horse, but you’ll name a knife after your horse?”) – on her hip.

Jon turned his head into his shoulder, in her direction. “Go,” he commanded.

Sansa snapped her head around. “Jon—”

“Go. He’s seen you, and you’ve been here for too long as it is.”

She never told him, but she modeled her childish vision of a hero after the boy he was, after the boy who rescued her thieved doll and slayed the monsters in the dark and helped clean up the lemon gratings he spilled. That boy was her brother, half-brother when Mother demanded it. But this man, the one who pulled men from his ranks to protect her and commissioned a dagger be forged for her and raised thousands of banners in her name, he was…

Jon Snow was everything Father promised Sansa Stark in a match.

And it lit her heart up, burst forth with the astute clarity that kept blindsiding her. Because she was right. It was love. Irrefutably.

Stupid girl, she conceded. He might die without ever knowing.

“Try to stay away from any loose ground. I’ve seen him hide caltrops before,” she warned, swallowed again and again, hysteria and panic converging in her throat.

Every second she waited for Jon’s acknowledging nod Ramsay thundered closer and closer. His eyes alighted on Sansa. That leer of his crawled under her skin, clawed its way into her insides, to her hands tightening on the reins. She wheeled her horse around and cantered for the forest, cloak billowing behind her in waves of blue and gray. On Jon’s protective order, Podrick and three more riders severed themselves from the ranks and raced to catch her, forming a wing on either side.

Almost to the trees, almost out of sight, Sansa threw a glance over her shoulder. Her friends – her family, of one sort or another – bobbed and blurred, regimented forward as their enemy based the hill, but Jon maintained her gaze.

He stared at her like it was the last time they’d ever see each other and she stared back to memorize him in case it was.

No. No, she couldn’t believe that probability. She couldn’t let herself believe that probability. It took a grave man to fly at death, but Jon was not a grave man, in fact afraid of it enough to fight it off tooth and nail. And she was not a grave woman, dagger at the ready to stay alive and reveal her heart true when he found her.

And he would find her, of that she knew with absolute certainty.

He would find her and they would be together again.

Chapter End Notes

So...yeah. Yay for Sansa for figuring out her feelings!
I'm headed straight for the castle

Chapter Summary

Sansa was right; it was their home. His home. His and his and his.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a Karstark who escorted Ramsay Bolton.

The pair pulled up short, locked between the two hills, locked between the two armies, close enough for Jon to recognize the man’s fundamental symmetry but not close enough to distinguish his finer details. Still, Jon knew him. Oh, Jon knew him.

He remembered Rickard Karstark and little Harald from every one of Father’s name day celebrations, always a seat for cadet branches, especially the older ones, particularly direct kin. The father and son swam about Jon’s memory; a last laugh here, a tankard booming on the table there, echoes of them as he and the other Stark children were sent to bed, dismissed from the festivities which followed them through the corridors anyway.

Jon wished he’d sneaked back downstairs with Robb and Theon those few times they dared to. He wished his ears had been tainted by the grown-up talk. Maybe war wouldn’t’ve been so startling. Maybe killing wouldn’t’ve been so surprising.

Maybe his stomach wouldn’t roil this way, knowing who was on the edge of his sword. Friend or foe, a familiar or a stranger, today, it seemed, a Karstark defied his sword, his name. Killing a foreigner was easy to sleep soundly on, the reasons just and the action necessary, but killing a man of his own territory, who existed in memories, it kept a man awake at night.

Would Harald Karstark keep Jon awake tonight?

(And there would be a tonight. He’d make sure of it, even in the face of certain death.)

Lord Karstark backed his horse up, away from a patch of snow. The horse thrust its head, ripping the reins from Lord Karstark’s hands, and sniffed at a puff of grass sprouting from beneath the thawing blemishes. As restless, rocking backward and forward, backward and forward, Lord Karstark corrected his steed, roughly jerking its head up and then coiling reins around his hand twice, three times, until both were painfully constrained.

Jon reflexively let loose on his rein, watching the horse below him swivel its flank in arches, trying to free itself of the harness.

In stark contrast, Ramsay sat as still as a statue and as stoic as one too. His right forearm braced on the pommel and his left crossed over the other, he didn’t so much as flick his eyes at the copse Sansa disappeared in to or raise a hand to signal his battalion or shout out some obscenity Jon imagined he was built of. No, he did nothing of the sort. As if Jon were a fish caught on a line he could patiently lure in, Ramsay sat atop his horse and stared.

Waiting.
The son of a bitch was waiting.

For what, Jon didn’t know. For what, Jon didn’t care. His skin prickled all the same.

“He seeks parley,” Brienne suspected, looked down the line to consult with anyone else on her reconnoiter. None met her gaze.

“Sansa said he’d never honor one,” Jon noted further.

“Perhaps not when you’re the one doing the asking.” She sighed and fidgeted, her armor clinking noisily together. “Do we oblige him?”

Tormund snorted at the suggestion. “Why should we?”

Yes, why? Men like Ramsay Bolton, cavalier and egocentric, didn’t accept terms of surrender, no matter what it was negotiated down to. Men like him, strident and a lout, didn’t go quietly or gently, not a fuel of death drive in them. In dissecting her husband, Sansa explained how he played games and how he riddled people and dismembered them, and how everything he did was designed to bait. And true to form, here he was baiting Jon’s temper. Baiting him into striking first. Baiting him to misstep.

So what did they glean from meeting him halfway?

“Charge forward on my signal,” Jon instructed Davos, clutching a fistful of saddle blanket as the wind rose up through the trees and the horses shifted in anticipation, itching to go, go, go, enough of the talk and let us go. “And be fast about it. You get to me and you put up a shield wall. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord,” Davos said slowly, furrowing his brow at Jon in a clear state of confusion, an infliction he mutually shared with the others. “What’s the signal?”

“You’ll recognize it.”

The line exchanged a look with each other. For all their planning, dawn to dusk and past, they were ill at ease with the sudden deviation. But wasn’t this the right way, at least a little bit? That Ramsay approach them first instead being lured the other way around? Despite that, Brienne found voice to affirm, “This isn’t part of the plan.”

Her inclusion still perplexed Jon; she had no war experience, said so herself, and would be better served as a camp sentinel, an opinion they agreed upon from the sound of Brienne’s vehement protests. But Sansa had been decisive on the matter, scarily so, walked away from the discussion before either managed another word.

Whether Sansa understood its implications or not, Jon feared for her most of all. And by refusing Brienne’s protection, he had no choice but to take matters into his own hands.

She had to survive.

“It’s only a slight alteration, Lady Brienne.” Jon pitched a smile at the knight, the best he could muster, but it was of little comfort, she pursing her lips to the side. “Tormund, with me.”

Jon nudged his heels in his horse’s sides and the destrier sprung forth. Like driving at a tilt, they plummeted down the hill, Tormund and his steed right there beside him, charging at the devil and his demons. And a devil Ramsay was, his smirk sliding into place as they bottomed the hill. In his trap hook, line, and sinker.
Wind slapped Jon’s face and scrubbed out every one of his thoughts, save for a few. Behind him he heard Davos corralling the ranks, getting them into formation and preparing to charge, and Jon thought of them, of the thousands of souls alive on his shoulders. Tormund pumped the reins, driving his horse faster to keep pace, and Jon thought of the free folk, who’d be hunted down and eliminated before his corpse was even carved.

And then Sansa. Of course Sansa. Above everyone else, Sansa. He felt desolate in returning to this world, heart crusted over and his whole being encapsulated by a void as big as the one he’d left behind. Until she arrived at Castle Black’s gates. Until she made this world worth something again. Dried of tears and sorrow as far as anyone saw, her belly full of spirits and tongue swimming in giggles, she gave Jon what he least expected (particularly from her, too like Lady Stark in a lot of ways).

Love was what Jon most desired, and love was what Sansa gave him.

The power of that blazed in him the courage of a hundred men. He could come out of this on the other side. He would come out of this on the other side. He had to go home to her. Tell her he felt it too, this sin, for his feelings were not foreign or unfamiliar but absent for far too long.

Lord Karstark coughed ahead of them, muffled it in his sleeve. Jon brushed aside all that stirred in his mind, just for now wiping away Sansa and the free folk and his army. They had a battle to win. He slowed to a trot. “When his man makes a move against me,” he said to Tormund, “slice him.”

“Aye,” Tormund grumbled, hardening his gaze on Lord Karstark.

Against the iron gray shelf clouds migrating to the south, Ramsay looked as pale as a sick child. And as crazed as a starving one, the parentheses around his mouth plumping as they neared, kicking the mole up higher on his right cheek.

For his whole life Jon was classified as one thing, first and foremost: Ned Stark’s Bastard. There were more derogatory sobriquets – the Snow in Winterfell, the Bastard of Winterfell – but after a time he stopped bemoaning his station and soldiered himself to wear those names as they were, without argument and at times resourceful. But one thing he never grew accustomed to was a stranger recognizing him with a single glance, before ever hearing his name. He bore no resemblance to Father; he inherited the same inky curls Robb did, but little else, not the hazel eyes or the protruding chin or the frame his siblings were compacted in.

Ramsay Bolton, however. From his drooping nose to his thin lips, he was unmistakably Roose Bolton’s son. And for a moment that didn’t pass with enough brevity, Jon envied him of that. Absurd, yes, incredulous, quite, but a nagging something envied his strong Bolton features and the opportunity of a legitimized name, things Jon himself was never honored with.

He knew there were more important characteristic similarities than appearance. Behavior-wise, Ramsay’s apple didn’t fall from Roose Bolton’s tree; he didn’t obtain his father’s understanding of respect and strategy. On the contrary, from the sounds of him, ‘savage’ and ‘barbarian’ fit Ramsay better than they did the free folk.

Pausing a short few feet from the man, Jon wondered if Roose felt any pride for what became of his son before he died, as Father was proud of him.

(Though, if anyone were capable of such sentiment towards Ramsay, he suspected the cunning Bolton lord would be.)

“Where’s my bride going?” Ramsay demanded to know. Jon gave no answer, bit his tongue to keep
from laughing, from snapping that it wasn’t so easy, that he’d hardly return Sansa just because the man asked. Perturbed and sighing, Ramsay said again, “Where’s my bride, bastard?”

“Where’s my brother, bastard?” Jon fired back.

“He’s safe and sound, I promise you.”

Birds wheeled over their heads, smudges of black weaving gracefully amidst the turbulence, keen eyes watching for the fray to commence. Jon was not a superstitious man, but he favored the crows’ constant swirl over the Bolton army and the way Tormund’s lips twitched ever so slightly.

Ramsay raised his eyes to the murder and sneered for all the wrong reasons. “It’s a good day for the crows. This morning they’ll watch our war and this afternoon they’ll treat themselves to your eyeballs,” he commented, and the crows cawed in agreement. His eyes fell to Tormund. “Do you wager they’ve ever tasted wildling?”

“Your victims have provided enough food,” Jon said, inclining his head to the burning saltires. “They needn’t anymore.”

“Some beasts have an insatiable hunger. Wildlings, for example. Your brother.” Jon jerked his head straight. “You should see him now. His first night home I watched him gorge himself sick on a raw pig. He was wild. Untamable,” Ramsay mused. “But I broke him of that.”

Jon grit his teeth. Conceded through his mounting temper, “A generous act.”

“I’ve employed him as a servant in my house. And once you’re returned Lady Bolton to me I’ll employ you as well. But first, dismount your horse and kneel before me,” Ramsay said. “Vow your loyalty to House Bolton. Proclaim me the true Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, and I will pardon your crimes. I will pardon you for deserting the Night’s Watch and pardon your sister for deserting her duties, and I will pardon the traitorous lords at your back. You’ll be my…” Ramsay paused, mashing his lips and sawing his jaw from side to side. And then there bloomed a grin. “You’ll be my food tester. And your wildlings will clean your body off my floor.”

What a picture, Jon thought spitefully, hatefully. He loathed this dishonorable lord – if anyone could call him that – and his words dripping venom, foreboding of chaos and full of fraudulent promises he’d be a fool to take at face value. Jon wanted nothing more than to break his hand on Ramsay’s face, to scatter splintered teeth in the mud from last night’s storm and wet the snow with his blood.

But not yet.

“Sounds a fair offer,” he managed.

“It is. One you should consider,” Ramsay said. “I have six thousand men and you have…what is that, three, four thousand? Why lead them into a battle you have no hope of winning? Get off your horse and kneel, and everyone may keep their skins.”

Right.

Beyond Ramsay, the van of mounted soldiers and likewise infantry were near indistinguishable from such a distance, and a tide of disappointment turned through Jon that he didn’t – or rather, couldn’t – spot Smalljon Umber’s long mane among the bannermen. Mincing words carefully, Ser Kyle ended any suspicion they had of how Rickon ended up in Ramsay’s possession, confirming the staunch Umbers had been the ones to gift him, who gave Ramsay Shaggydog’s head and a free folk woman too.
Jon would never align himself with the likes of these people. He wanted to rid the world of them instead.

He nudged his horse thither, ignored Tormund hissing his name. “You tortured and raped my sister. You desecrated my home. And now you have the outstanding gall to demand I kiss your ring. Make no mistake, I want to fight you. So let us do this one-on-one. Just you and me,” he proposed.

“A duel,” Ramsay gasped in delight, pursing his lips.

“Aye. The old way. The honorable way.”

“Haven’t you heard, bastard? The old ways are dying.”

“Then should we not honor them one last time?” Jon eased back in his saddle, transferring the reins to one hand and resting the other casually on his thigh, a finger toying closer to Longclaw. Lord Karstark touched his own broadsword, tentative on the hilt. “Unless you’re frightened the men who fight for you will see you won’t fight for them.”

Ramsay rolled his eyes, snorting. Yet, he entertained the idea. “What are the terms?”

“If I win you grant Sansa a divorce,” Jon firmly stated. “You will yield Winterfell and return to the Dreadfort to live out your days never again considering conquering someone else’s castle and the titles that come with it. You will leave myself, my family, and the free folk alone.”

“And when you lose you will forfeit my beloved wife,” Ramsay bargained. And again that leer. “I’ve missed her terribly. I look forward to having her in my bed tonight. After I’ve had her I think I’ll give her to the men for their amusement. And then my dogs will feast on her. How does that sound?”

Jon sucked in an inaudible breath, cold between his teeth.

_Little shit._

Images rose unbidden in his mind, and suddenly Sansa’s end was clearer to him than the Night King breaching the Wall. From the darkest recesses and behind a door locked thrice, in the sickness of a reality he wanted to forget could exist, he saw her. A defiled rag on the floor, in her bed. Tangled hair as red as the beads leaking from her skin, slashed to ribbons from his brutality. Ramsay’s seed drying between her legs, his savagery tearing her over and over.

_Fucker._

God knew how many skeletons Ramsay would grow in her belly before her body stopped responding to moon tea. Before she drained rubies from her wrists.

_Fucking cunt._

A string of more curses overruled Jon’s filter, he not the least bit ashamed of their vulgarity. His blood boiled as more images accosted him – Sansa passed around a circle of Bolton soldiers, the scars pockmarking her perfect flesh, her screaming into a pillow as Ramsay moved on top of her, in her. No, those words weren’t vulgar enough.

_Son of a bitch cunt bastard._

Jon let her down once, hadn’t investigated what became of her after disappearing from Joffrey Baratheon’s wedding and left her to rot under the thumb of too many monsters. But not again. Never
again. This tribulation in her life ended here, ended once and for all.

He tipped his head, wanted to curl his lip in disgust, in disdain of this man, but kept himself blank
and impassive. “One thing I’ve learned about bullies in my life is that they’re all cowards at heart,”
he said. “I rescind my terms.”

A grin crept onto Ramsay’s face. “So the wolves have returned to Winterfell.”

“We have,” Jon said, and pulled Longclaw from its scabbard with one slow, tantalizing screech. It
was a ballad to his ears and he hoped an infernal siren song to Ramsay’s. “And I’ve marked you for
death.”

Ramsay clucked his tongue. “I’m certain my father taught you, as mine did, that it’s death to bare
steel against your liege lord.”

“I see no lord,” Jon growled. “Only a boy play-acting as one.”

“Very well.”

And immediately, the war for Winterfell and her lady began.

It burst to life like that comet blasted into their troposphere: in a weltering blur, in a tantivy, howling
its heart of battle cries and siren songs.

The pairs charged one another in unison, barreled hard and fast and thundering, spitting divots in
their wake. Jon in his crosshairs, Ramsay slapped his longsword against his horse’s hip, a tendril of
blood spurting out of the beleaguered laceration. He pulled ahead of Lord Karstark and Tormund
leapt to intercept. A dagger withdrawn from his person and a cry as sharp from his chest, Tormund
steered towards Ramsay. Effectively cutting in front of Jon, he avoided a collision by no more than a
breath.

Startled, Jon’s colt screamed. Reared up and clashed his hooves. Jon grasped onto his sweat-slicked
neck.

The intervention didn’t escape Ramsay’s notice; digging his heels in the irons, he rooted himself on
the horse’s back and drew back the reins. His steed threw up its head, the first bubbles of foam
flinging off, but ground its hooves. Ramsay swooped wide behind Lord Karstark, who veered,
undeterred, at Tormund.

Jon watched in horror as the two made contact with a sickening crunch. They bashed and slammed
together, a mess of tangled legs and necks and squealing whinnies. The horses thudded to the ground
in a crush of limbs, throwing both riders from their mounts. Tormund somersaulted out of the fall,
clawing at the mud and snow for purchase, but Lord Karstark staggered to his feet. Snatches of the
sky glistened off the wobbling steel.

Shaking, the man held the sword in both hands, pried his legs apart and took his stance bravely. But
for every step forward Tormund advanced he stumbled back one too, looked from Tormund to
Ramsay, Tormund to Ramsay, and there, right before Jon’s eyes, he dissolved to a boy. Frightened
and alone as he realized his lord, cantering laps around the three of them, wouldn’t break cycle to
help him. Had essentially abandoned him.

Lord Karstark’s fate had never been his own. First his father’s, and then Ramsay’s, and now
Tormund’s on Jon’s order. He’d die in this valley, the first of too many. Too late for salvation.

Tormund lunged.
"You're running out of time, bastard," Ramsay shouted, taunting him.

He was. Seven hells, he was. The armies flew from their perches, heaped over the edge, manicured waves rippling along the banks of war. The forked banners whipped and snapped in the blistering wind. Jon spied Davos leading the charge, Brienne on one side, Lord Reed the other, the wind faintly carrying "Follow your commander!" to him. It was a mystifying sight, thousands upon thousands of men storming their reapers and their scythes, but still. No, he grunted. No, no, too early, go back.

Jon spun his destrier. He had but a few minutes, if that. He had to get Ramsay off his horse before his army enveloped him. Before he escaped into their mass.

Ramsay wouldn’t sword chase; they were too practiced for that. But Ramsay wasn’t trained by Rodrick Cassel or the Night’s Watch or the free folk or the White Walkers. Jon suspected he fought as he did everything else: brutally and wildly, a butcher’s swing on an easily-riled temper. The very things Jon could take advantage of. If he got in Ramsay’s eight o’clock the contortion to engage would prove too tempting to ignore. And if he kept Ramsay swinging and kept him missing he’d tire.

Easy to drag out of the saddle. Easy to force down.

"Is that all you’re good for?" he called to Ramsay. "Stalling until your army gets here?"

He clicked his colt into a contained canter, collecting his energy, building his speed. Waited for Ramsay to curve around behind him. Waited to stand between Ramsay and his army. Ramsay snarled, but he proceeded with his rotations.

Steady. "Are you afraid to fight me?" he said.

Steady. Further harassed his enemy: "You prove me correct again. You are a coward."

Steady. Come and see, you bastard.

And then, barking a “Ha!”, Jon and his destrier surged. Ramsay looped back and drove at him, too, sword lanced and cackling madly. From the heap of madness done to him, a phoenix punctured through Jon’s chest. It sighed and slithered up Longclaw, lacing around the cold blade, and ignited it in the fire it spewed. Snaked into Jon’s veins and ignited him too as he ran steadfast at Ramsay.

Their swords sang beautifully. Clanked and clattered, the contact juddering all the way up Jon’s arm. But it was too swift a swipe to unseat the other, galloped right past each other like two tourney riders. They drove at one another again and again. The outermost ring of Jon’s army bottoming the hill, Ramsay ran at Jon once more, pushing farther onto Jon’s side. Their horses reared before metal skinned metal. Lifted up on their hind legs and struck out at their attacker, ears pinned back and white around the eyes.

Jon spurred a heel in his horse’s side and they sprung from the clash. Blessedly, Ramsay gave chase. Jon cornered a smirk, chancing a glance over his shoulder as he ran their line in Davos’ direction. His army was no closer to them than Ramsay’s was, but if he kept moving Ramsay’s army couldn’t catch him. And if Ramsay kept trapped in his antagonizing, if he kept chasing…Jon might be able to capture him.

He had to get him off the horse. Get him off the horse, get him off the horse, get him –

Ramsay’s longsword nipped his back. Now or never, then. Jon pumped the reins, Davos and Brienne and Lord Reed in his sightline, and then –
He twisted his body around.

And Ramsay’s sword speared him.

The blade caught under his arm, in that thin sliver of his armpit. It bit viciously into his side, sawed and tore his leathers. The tip sliced his newly-minted flesh and Jon yelped, couldn’t chomp down on it fast enough. Ramsay’s fangs exposed themselves, glinting over his lips. Jon saw in his eyes that he thought he’d won, assumed Jon’s demise right there and rightfully on his sword.

But he was wrong. Jon was no longer a toy of the Fates or the Lord of Light or whomever. Couching the sword firmly under his arm, the phoenix hissed its assent and together they turned. Forced Ramsay around and around in circles, faster and tighter and faster. The first embers of panic blossomed on Ramsay’s face and he throttled his weapon, made to unhinge the turning point, but no. No.

Roaring ferociously, Jon threw his whole body at Ramsay.

He roared for Winterfell and the scum saturating its every wall since the Starks left. He roared for Father, who only wanted what was best for his children. For Lady Stark, who lost everything she held dear by effect. For Robb, for the wife he barely got to hold and the child he never did. For Arya, running to the beat of a drum everyone else scorned her for because they could not hear it. For Bran, lost somewhere in the wilderness, and for Rickon, who might already be lost to them.

He roared for Sansa, the heart of his enterprise. For Sansa and every piece of her, shattered by reality named Lannister and Bolton and Baelish. For her naked hope and the strength she found, maybe not as malleable as everyone assumed.

They crashed to the wet ground, sprayed in mud and the wind punched out of Ramsay as Jon landed on top of him. Ramsay’s steed bolted for home, reins flapping and no one to retrieve it, abandoning its master. Likewise, their swords skidded out of reach, but still Ramsay strained for his, unearthing his arm and stretching. Grunting. Baring his teeth.

His fingers brushed the cross guard. Blood pulsed in Jon’s ears, but the rattle of coming forces beat against him harder, and he vaulted for Longclaw. Lurched to the side and just in the nick of time as a neigh pealed behind him, over their heads. His colt bounced and hopped and reared, capturing Ramsay underneath his raining hooves. Nostrils flaring and overgrown mane flicking spiked waves, beautiful and magnanimous in his viciousness, the horse meant to trample Ramsay.

As he dropped one last time, Jon feared he’d succeed. (Hoped he’d succeed.) Jon saw it lay out before him, clear in his mind’s eye: the crunch of Ramsay’s skull cracking; its collapse; the squish like pressing grapes as his face flattened.

All the blood. More than he expected from so heartless a man.

How it played out true went in slow motion. Ramsay snatched up his sword and crying out, he plunged the blade into the horse’s belly. Dragged the sword forward, slit him open at the seam. A strangled scream rent the air. Wrenched out of Jon, too. A deluge of blood soaked Ramsay, but he licked his lips, greedily drank it down, and kept going and going. Slashed between the legs. Cut into the chest. And, finally, agonizingly juddered free from the breast.

The warhorse pitched to the ground, weightless and emptied.

And pinned Ramsay beneath him.

Chest heaving, Jon hobbled to his feet, slipping and sliding in the mud. He advanced slowly on his
enemy, gave so wide a berth as he circled him that Ramsay only heard his boots crunching all around him, could possibly snatch a glimpse if he craned his head the right way. Ramsay pushed futility at the corpse, that panic blossoming again and his attempts dwindling to desperate and jerky slaps.

Watching his struggle was almost...sad. Pathetic.

Satisfying.

Jon’s knuckles curled white on the want to pummel the man, to punch him again and again and again until his arm tired. Until he collapsed on his victim like a lead anchor burdened his shoulders. Until Ramsay was thoroughly defanged and dead everywhere but his barely breathing body.

Gods, he wanted it. For Sansa. For Rickon. For Theon, even.

He stood over Ramsay, straddling either side of his head. If he wasn’t careful Ramsay could grab his ankles and hoick or stick his sword in his leg, so he poised Longclaw to his throat. Tipped his chin up. Ramsay grinned, swiping his tongue manically across his bottom lip. “You’ve got me bested here. So what are you going to do, bastard?”

There was so much he could do. Wanted to do. But Ramsay’s front line was so much closer than Jon anticipated at that moment, drawing closer with every second he wasted. To his right Lord Karstark lay crumpled at Tormund’s feet, his friend’s jaw bearded in blood. As he ripped the dagger from Lord Karstark’s chest Jon saw it too was sleeved burgundy.

He had no idea who – or even if – Ramsay appointed as marshal, but it was time to test their suspicions. Let him see how close Ramsay’s army dared tread with their lieutenant dead and their lord apprehended. Was Ramsay’s life forfeit to win the battle?

Jon had to know.

Gritting his teeth, he stomped on Ramsay’s right hand. Hammered his anger over and over like battering a nail in his coffin until that splendid sound graced his ears. That of bones breaking, that of their give, that of Ramsay’s wail. He confiscated Ramsay’s sword and stepped apart from him. Relishing the sight of Ramsay cradling his mangled fingers, Jon collared him, heaved him out from under the horse and hauled him backward on his ass. To behind enemy lines.

Tormund followed from a distance. “What are you doing?” he shouted.

“Fall back,” Jon ordered.

Flecks of mud speckling his cheeks and shivering in his kill’s innards with a broken hand and more to come, Jon marveled at Ramsay’s streak-free bravado. “Surrendering already, bastard?” he fleered, and coughed up a spat of blood with it.

Jon didn’t dignify him with a response.

He towed Ramsay kicking and squabbling and hoeing a trail after him until he felt the ground shake, humming up his legs. The crown of Ramsay’s head was crusted between Jon’s fingers as he fist a chunk of Ramsay’s hair and manipulated him roughly to his feet, only to kick him to his knees. Jon heard the knobs crack deliciously, loved the sound, loved the sound. He gave a sharp yank and held, baring Ramsay’s dirt-freckled throat to his men.

Twiddling his fingers, Jon held his other hand out to Tormund; the man passed him the soused dagger. Though he was a despicable one indeed, Ramsay wore the title and air of a lord, of a Warden, and for that he was entitled to a dignified tool to die by. Jon debated the merits of such a
courtesy, but like scraping a knife on a strop he cleaned the jagged stone blade on Ramsay’s skin. Smeared one face then the other on each side his neck.

He gripped Ramsay’s hair tighter, angled the tip at his Adam’s apple.

“End him now!” Tormund urged, unsheathing Ramsay’s sword from Jon’s belt and squatting low.

But Jon shook his head. “We have to see what they do.” Every one of their next moves relied on the Bolton army’s reaction to their lord’s state. Would they stutter to a halt at the sight or blaze ahead anyway? Jon planned for, prayed for, the former. With Ramsay as prisoner Jon could manipulate his orders, back the Bolton army all the way to Winterfell, driven by a shield wall and their missing lord until they were in exactly the right position to be sieged.

To be conquered.

Jon leaned over Ramsay’s right shoulder, rasped in his ear, “You performed well, Lord Bolton. Just as your wife said you would.”

“She didn’t,” Ramsay seethed from the side of his mouth. His Adam’s apple bobbed all the same.

“But she did,” Jon said. “A moth will always fly at the flame, she said, no matter how many time it’s been burned before. It never learns.”

The hum in Jon’s leg traipsed higher, into his groin, his hips, his chest. Rattled him so hard he felt like that eight-year-old again, permitted on one of Father’s hunts for the first time and that privilege perhaps making him too bold, chasing a rabbit ahead of the hounds. His mount, as eager as he, had startled at a flock of birds lifting from some trees and backwards he tumbled, bounced his head off a log and stars there to catch him. When he roused he thought he was flying, off the ground and battered by the wind and nothing to grab on to, but it was Father instead, throttling Jon so hard he flopped around limply.

Jon never again saw the immutable worry that creased Father’s face that day, but he still felt it. The desperate turbulence. The rushed relief Father expelled when he hugged him. Sometimes he felt its phantom skimming him, enough to wake him.

He felt it now, rumbling him. Almost felt the hot breath puffing from the horses stampeding at his back.

And then he did. And then it was real.

The cavalry reached him first, Davos and Brienne slinging from their horses’ backs and the others following suit. They elbowed past Jon and Tormund and staked their shields in the earth, braced their shoulders and sank to a knee. And then the infantry roared up behind them and for just a moment, just a glimpse between the crenels of the makeshift palisades before the soldiers planted shields over their heads and huddled together, Jon saw Ramsay’s army slow. Hesitate. Stop.

Jon ducked under the mottled roof, crouched low and brought Ramsay with him, trying with all his might to melt into the ground and further vanish from view. “Hold!” he bellowed, swiveled his head left and right. “Hold!”

The phalanx tarried obediently. Seemed to breathe as one. Emplaced so close, arms brushing, panting hot and stale on each other’s backs, Jon heard the rattled breathing of a dozen of his men, heard Lord Reed’s wet and horrific coughing from a few tiers behind him. Brienne’s trembling emanated against his left arm, and the stifling swill of sweat and blood and mud clogged his throat.
He swallowed, beat down the bile, and regarded Davos on his right. “I told you to wait for my signal. You were early,” he criticized.

“If I’d waited any longer his army would’ve gotten to you first,” Davos responded. He rose up slightly, peeking between the shields. “What do we do now?”

“Push forward,” Jon said.

Beckoned forth, the archers wove to the front like snakes in the grass. They had to be careful, Jon knew, an archer brushing past him and stationing himself at the shield wall’s shoulders. For now the Bolton army lay in wait, in limbo, not quite to the licking saltires but close enough that if Jon attacked too fast and too far from Winterfell they’d go on the defense. And then they’d be out of range of the Glovers and the Greyjoys and the Arryns and everyone else who pledged their swords.

No, for now they were safe barricaded behind this unassailable phalanx. But they had to push for home. They had to get on the bullseye the thousands waiting in the wings expected them to trespass on.

Pushing his thumb in the dagger’s guard, Jon marched Ramsay to the fore, shields bumping and fluttering to make room. Davos hastened on his heel. “Tell your men to fall back, Lord Bolton,” Jon ordered.

Ramsay cackled, as if it were the most preposterous thing he’d ever heard and Jon the most preposterous person he’d ever met. Despite the broken hand and crushed legs reminding him otherwise. Still he attested, “They’ll never retreat. They’re Boltons.”

Nicking the underside of Ramsay’s jaw, Jon corrected him, “I did not say ‘retreat’. I said ‘fall back’.”

A growl simmered in Ramsay’s chest. Jon edged the blade deeper. Drew forth a trickle of blood like sap oozing from a tree, streaming beneath Ramsay’s collar. The air harbored a nervous twittering, but one titular voice rose up over the others, over the command’s heads and sneaking into the phalanx, pleading for his master. Again he shouted for Ramsay, more desperate.

“Tell them,” Jon pressed. “Now.”

Ramsay’s compliance blasted from his mouth cracked and high. And the great Bolton army stumbled over each other, tripping over their own feet to recede. Jon commanded his army thusly; the fore picked up their shields and, in unison with the rest of the phalanx, trooped forward. Steady and uniform, shins exposed and every step a chant, a grunt and a chorus of Ha. Ha. Ha. Across the campesstral and flowing between the saltires. Up the steep incline and on to the other side.

There weren’t a perimeter of trenches waiting for them but saltires. So many, in fact, lined up as they were, Ramsay had constructed an excess wall. Too tall to hack down and too tightly compacted to slither through the marginal diamonds, columns of smoke wrapping high above Winterfell. Another fucking obstacle. An essentially impassable one, if they wanted to remain in phalanx formation. Jon was hesitant to do otherwise, didn’t like the idea of losing their safety in numbers and the probability they’d return to a slaughter if they divided up to circumvent the long line.

Cornered worse more, the army stuttered. In doing so, by accident or by intention, Ramsay stepped on the heel of the soldier in front of him. Who stumbled into the soliders in front of him, setting forth a chain reaction like dominos plinking each other until they plowed into a hefty boulder of a man three rings out who turned a glare over his shoulder.

Brienne reached out to the teetering soldier in front of her, steadying herself as much as steadying
him. Her legs trembled from the exertion of crouching in such cramped confinements. “What now?”

“I don’t know,” Jon said, bowed his head and tried so hard to ignore the others jerking his way. Wanting orders, needing guidance. Things out of his hands at the moment, for one piece could not move without the other and the other hadn’t yet blown its horn.

Why didn’t his army have a signal of their own? A horn, a bell, an anything, a whatever to not only commence the second half of their plan but for a distress call? If Ramsay’s army managed to slip onto the Winterfell side of the saltires and pushed them on Jon’s army…

Nothing made of bone or iron could sustain such a mass. Especially with every one of them on fire.

Scanning the men around him, Jon saw courage thinly veil anxiety and fear, even among the ones toting white falcons. These were his men. Borrowed from a menagerie of other lords and houses and commanders, sure, but his on this field and his to get off of it. Their fear was his fear and their anxiety his anxiety. They had wives and children and siblings to return home to. As did he.

He’d get them off this field alive, or die trying.

“Archers, knock!” he shouted. Arrows notched into place, angled to the ground and claws worth of fingers waiting for “Draw!” Strings whining, the archers pulled the hook to their chin, the fleck to their cheek, and released on “Loose!”

The arrows streaked through the air. One punctured an enemy in the chest. Harpooned another, from chin to the back of his skull. Some ducked, but one by one the fore infantry was knocked down, chucked to their knees and their yelps shuddering the earth all the way to Jon. The phoenix snapped its wings triumphantly as one row of men then another lay dying, gurgling on their own blood.

So small a victory, but Jon gave the commands again.

However, it was short-lived victory.

The assail suddened the enemy’s spines, and at once they retaliated. Planted their shields, as tall and as wide as they themselves, in the thickening earth and lanced their spears in the crevices. Not quite sarissas but certainly longer than Jon’s poor splintered excuses, the wretched things badgered forward and forward. Breathing down Jon’s neck and pushing his phalanx back and back. Into the sweet spot, of course; a sheet of arrows showered from Winterfell’s ramparts, whistled clear over Jon’s head.

His phalanx braced for impact, sealed tighter until nary a beam of light leaked in.

Mere seconds passed and they were battered. Arrows buffeted the roof, spears inundated their wall, thank whatever fucking god shrouding him that Bolton’s army wasn’t enveloping them from the sides just yet and they could hold this position until the horn (the blasted horn). Several arrows sneaked in, clanging off helmets and off less protected spots, and Jon heard the pain ripple all around him, and just a few minutes longer. Just a few min –

“Lord Commander!” chorused a dozen men from all corners of him, cramped back-to-back, shoulder-to-shoulder he couldn’t pinpoint precisely where. One closest to him shouted, “Lord Commander, what do we do?” It might’ve been Lord Reed or Brienne or Davos, he didn’t know, he couldn’t hear or distinguish or answer.

He couldn’t answer, he couldn’t answer, he couldn’t answer – he couldn’t think.

(Except: he lost the upper hand. How the fuck did he lose the upper hand?)
“Release Lord Bolton,” responded an enemy soldier from behind his shield.

Too fast the tides had changed. Forced back the way they came and grabbing onto the person in front of them as they crested the hill, their feet slipped in the mud, agitated by the blood of their fallen. Sections of the phalanx briefly crumbled, pocket after pocket, as the soldiers stumbled over those fallen. Jon looked around wildly, a way out, a way forth, a way through. He glimpsed a Vale knight guised in free folk fur squeeze between the shields.

The knight rampaged at the opposing army, cut down one spear, two spear, three. Kicked them to his fellow knights, who scooped them up quick and combated the Bolton stance with a mirrored one. The knight slashed and banged against the newly-unarmed shields, jammed his foot at one.

One that decided to fight back. The shield plowed him to the ground, onto his back. The soldiers behind it stepped out of formation, and his comrades cheered, went up in flames of jubilance. He advanced on the knight to their whoops and hollers, took every step to the beat of their swords against shield. Like chopping firewood he swung and the knight threw up his arm.

The sword embedded in his vantbrace.

Gnashing his teeth to keep from screaming, the knight pulled his snagged arm to his chest, lobbed the soldier off balance, and swung low. Severed his opponent at the ankles. Opened a geyser in his heel and shambled him on threads. The man wailed and ripped his sword free, and the knight rolled once, twice, away from him but into the warpath of another.

For a second Bolton soldier broke formation. The world muted in Jon’s ears as the soldier grasped his shield in both hands and swiftly, mercilessly, decapitated the knight.

The time for stalling was over. They were safer in numbers, yes, and barricaded, yes, but they’d be annihilated if they waited any longer. Wun Wun should’ve blown the horn by now. The other armies should’ve arrived by now. If they weren’t coming, if they’d thought better of their pledge or someone else got to them first…

Like floating around rocks in a brook, the knight’s head rolled down the incline, descending the ranks, catching on a soldier’s boot toe and bumping into other feet. It trundled past Jon, snagged in the fissure between him and Davos. He couldn’t not stare at it, ensnared on its horrified vestige and how he let that happen, how he didn’t stop it from happening. Should’ve stopped it from happening.

Ramsay’s intact fingers twitched and itched for the head, gross and spurring Jon to notch the dagger under his Adam’s apple. Davos scooted aside a touch and the head continued on its merry way, descending the ranks and to well and far behind them. Jon’s gaze followed, plagued by his thoughts, dizzied by them.

If he wanted to get these men off this battlefield alive, if he wanted to see Sansa again, he realized he had to lead as if they were alone. As if no one was coming.

If they were they would’ve been there by now.

“Break off!” he bellowed, and it was like the shrill of a starting bell; his prized structure collapsed entirely.

The phalanx opened and the thick fog of war encased Jon as the two forces crashed into each other. Infantry and cavalry alike soared past him, waving swords and waving fury, all of it colluding in Jon’s ear until it was nothing but a hazy ringing, incessant and splitting. Running until their legs broke and fighting to the end of their days, he watched his fore dive at the Bolton front, sacrificially
impaling themselves on the spears, guaranteeing safe passage for their comrades who plunged in behind them.

Tormund dashed from his crouch, Lord Reed right after, abandoning Davos and Brienne to watch Jon’s six. He shouted at them to go, go, pushed at their backs and kicked at their heels until they joined the chaos. They danced and spun to the song of swords and what a magnificent song. What a beauty, what an enchantment, righting the world back on its axis. The sound entranced Jon and his mouth filled with saliva, lusting for it, thirsting for it, a bloodlust he couldn’t quell, wanted it wanted it. But with Ramsay struggling in his arms, still his prisoner, how could he –

A horn sounded in the distance, from the trees they’d come.

It seized Jon, wiped his thoughts, and seized the armies too, stunned to stillness as Wun Wun and the rest of the free folk galumped out of the trees. Lips on the mouthpiece, Wun Wun tooted the horn again, louder, more abrasive, shaking the birds from the trees and the trees from their roots. A roar faded in softly behind it, so soft it was a buzz that then, soon, escalated to a swarm, beating the earth and frenzying the air.

The half dozen-plus armies sworn to his and Sansa’s campaign flooded from their crannies, on a crash course with violence, and Jon grinned, yes, yes, his grip on the dagger still holding Ramsay’s pulse between its incisors loosening. Ruffled from their frozen state, patches of the Bolton army tucked tail and ran, trying to desert, but were blocked in every which direction they attempted to scatter towards. Bullmoose ambushed from the southeast. Silver gauntlets and bears punched apart the west, colliding with the swinging boughs and krakens riving the southwest. Ser Kyle and her Cerwyn battalion blitzed Winterfell’s blindside, eradicating its inner curtain of the Bolton archers in a single sweep.

If any soldier lucked past the swords and poleaxes and bows of those invaders they were not blessed much further, forced to contend with something much worse. The rest of Lord Baelish and Lord Arryn’s promised Knights of the Vale, all eighty-five hundred white falcons, emerged from the shadows, strong lines four rings thick circling the battlefield’s periphery. Steadily marching. Steadily cinching the battle in its core. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

Nowhere to run (the saltires oppressing their path to flee).

Nowhere to hide (open ground, open hunt).

Wun Wun mowed down every person and horse in his path, their arrows meaningless and their sword stabs no more than a needle prick. He batted them aside left and right, swiped them with the back of his hand or punted them through the air, nothing able to deter or distract him from the saltires cylindered in his focus. They were the last obstruction, the last infringement, the sole way to truly converge the armies, and like blowing down a house of cards, he pulled one saltire down.

Then two.

Three.

Four.

Smatterings of Bolton soldiers were trapped underneath the fiery Xs, unable to escape and screaming in agony as the flames devoured them whole. The dirt and the snow quickly extinguished the fires and now free to pass either way, the Bolton army made the leap, right into new clutches and the old ones following as Jon’s army gave chase.
Without the heat shimmering his view, Jon could’ve sworn he spotted Theon’s tousled hair amongst the soldiers, mouth gaping wide as he took out a man rampaging at a woman who Jon assumed to be his sister, Queen Yara. The man fell at the woman’s feet, literally kissing her boots, and she blew hair off her sweat-sheened forehead and spun to face her next adversary.

Beyond them Winterfell’s North Gate opened and one by one three trebuchets were rolled out, attendants sharing the burden of several boulders. Jon inhaled sharply; with the gates open and Ramsay still in his possession, he could find Rickon. Find Rickon before anything happened to him. Find Rickon before –

Ramsay stomped on Jon’s instep. He tore Jon’s arm from his throat and jabbed his elbow in Jon’s side, punching the air from Jon’s lungs and he hunching forward. The force expelled Ramsay from his hold, ripping out a fistful of his hair, and Ramsay crushed Jon’s wrist in his palm. Twisted his arm and twisted his arm until Jon heard his back crack and his legs caved and his fingers went numb. The dagger stuck in the mud. Roaring through gritted teeth, Jon heaved his other arm up and blasted his fist across Ramsay’s jaw. Poorly aimed, wanted his eye, wanted to blind the bloody fucking bastard, but effective nonetheless; Ramsay dropped Jon’s wrist and spat a mouthful of blood at the dark-curled commander, a tooth bouncing off Jon’s chest.

Then men stared at each other, chests heaving, ragged and wrecked and ruined, in no state to fight yet inching for their swords anyway. Broken hand nursed to his chest, Ramsay grabbed an abandoned sword from nearby, clumsily gripped it in the wrong hand. Jon almost laughed, heartened by his stupid bravado. “You’re going to fight me with one good hand?”

“If the Kingslayer can do it so can I,” Ramsay said.

“Very well.”

Jon ran at Ramsay, feinted left, right. Ramsay thrust and Jon ducked, leaning far to the left and the sword ghosting over his shoulder. He looped his left arm underneath Ramsay’s and threw it away from him, swung wide with his right and stabbed Ramsay in the side. The blade dug into the sweet flesh Ramsay’s armor forgot to cover. Curling his lip, Jon pushed it in further, felt the tip snag.

Ramsay’s throat rattled wetly as he sucked air between his blood-stained teeth, a canine missing and his tongue flicking through the space. A menace to the end, he wrapped his contorted and swollen blue fingers around the blade and hissing so hard his chest stopped moving, he pulled Longclaw out of his side.

Impossibly combating Jon’s own strength, Ramsay gripped the sword firmly, not caring or not noticing his bare palm slicing open and blood dripping from the blade onto his shoes. A fighter to the end, Ramsay rammed his foot in Jon’s gut, sending him stumbling backward, his foot clipping on a stone. By the time he looked up Ramsay was sprinting across the battlefield.

War repaved the campestral as a minefield, bubbling blood, its loaded bombs the bodies he had to hurtle and the loose horses he had to veer around. Ramsay’s floundering gait carried him across the field, careened him almost to the ground several times, but his eyes were on the prize, on the sanctuary, the beacon that was Winterfell’s open gates and the catapults being loaded next to it.

He flung himself over a downed saltire, chanced a glance over his shoulder and picked his feet up higher, picked his feet up faster, Jon on his heels and something else. Something bigger running up behind him, something red beaded, something…

It fastened to his mind with perfect clarity, and Ramsay’s eyes blew wide.
A hulk of white flashed past Jon. Too small to be a horse, too fast to be one either, Jon realized what – who – it was mere seconds before Ghost leapt over a saltire and onto Ramsay’s back. The direwolf sank his teeth in Ramsay’s shoulder as they fell face-first, rending muscle, crunching bone. Ramsay swallowed mud as he screamed, futility kicking his legs and beating Ghost’s side. His struggle only made Ghost embed his fangs deeper.

His cries alerted the nearby Bolton soldiers and several jerked their heads that way, scouring the mayhem for their lord. The closest slit the throat of the soldier he had in a headlock, throwing the man to the ground and marching Ramsay’s way. Spotting this, Jon shouted Ghost’s name, pumped his legs faster, almost there, almost there.

Another soldier splattered in Bolton red made to cut Jon off, raging at him, poleax flailing over his head. Jon met the man halfway, and their blades met in a horrific screech, punctured past their strenuous grunts, spittle dribbling off their chins. Jon felt his curls dance along his cheek and forehead, hadn’t noticed they’d weaseled out of the bun before now but did now, distracted and irritated and couldn’t push them back when he was locked in with this man like this. He expelled a breath, but they hardly fluttered.

Conjuring up a burst of strength, Jon shoved the man back and slashed Longclaw low across his belly. Intestines puddled between his feet as Jon yanked the sword out. His legs gave way under him.

Out of the corner of his eye Jon spotted a Bolton soldier – squabbling with a Vale horse he stole from the looks of the plate across the mount’s breast – plow through the field to his right. He flipped Longclaw right, shuffled his feet and firmed his stance, ready to cut the man from his saddle, first the man then the mace whirling in his hand.

But Wun Wun batted them away, blasting them off their feet.

Jon nodded his gratitude to the giant and Wun Wun nodded back, the smallest smirk creasing his face, and then the earth exploded around them.

A massive boulder whipped Jon up in its dirt, crashing to his right, and he dropped to his hands and knees, throwing an arm over his head. Another landed short at just the right curve and rolled, crushing Stark and Bolton soldiers alike and then smashing a saltire to splinters. Jon coughed and tucked his face closer to his chest, covering his mouth as the last boulder sprayed him from behind.

When the dust settled and evaporated in the mirthless gray sky, three boulders were implanted about the field, mostly on Jon’s side of the saltires, pulverizing holes in both sides. Not trusting his legs just yet, Jon crawled forward several feet, taking stock as he went. Over the heads of the unfettered clash the next batch of boulders were being loaded. He was in their range, then, in their crosshairs and their likeliest target. He wasn’t safe on this side. He was too far away from Ramsay, from Rickon and Winterfell and Sansa’s private justice. Had to get over the saltires, had to get to the other side.

The ground shuddered again, and Jon flattened onto his belly, shielding his head. But then it stilled, hummed to nothing, not more in quick succession of the first. Jon looked around. Froze. A boulder marbled red at his side, Wun Wun was collapsed on his front, the side of his head cratered in. Jon’s breath hitched, his vision blurring as tears pricked his eyelashes.

Then he heard the trebuchets wheeze, heard the whine as it launched. Heard the whistle in the air.

He ground his teeth. Mourning would have to wait. Sorrow was always the flip side of a war won, but losing the fallen’s cause was dishonorable to their memory.
Jon lurched to his feet and ran. Ran until he was sure his heart would burst and breath would spark a fire in his heart. Ran until he thought his legs would break. He lungs did turn to fire and his legs did feel like they’d fall off, but he drove harder, further, more boulders sailing over his head, beelining for Tormund who fought back-to-back with Brienne.

Three Bolton soldiers circled them, taunted and laughed though both towered heads above the rest. Without breaking his stride Jon hurtled the satires. And lodged his sword between one of the soldier’s shoulder blades, the tip perforating out of his chest. Using the other assailants’ startle to their advantage, Tormund and Brienne swiftly reduced them to nothing.

Tormund wrenched the arrow sticking out of his right shoulder, snapping it in half over his knee. His furs were matted with blood, his knives sweating it, no way to tell what was new, what was his, what was other peoples. “We had that handled,” he told Jon as he skidded up to them.

“I don’t doubt you did,” Jon agreed.

He scoured the field. The couple hundred still standing weren’t fighting each other on grass or snow or mud any longer but on bodies, trampled those left to die and wobbled on those already gone. Jon saw Theon and Lord Glover and Lord Reed and Yara and a few more faces he vaguely recognized, but nowhere in sight was Ramsay Bolton. The North Gate was still pried open, and Jon had little doubt in his mind that that was where the Bolton bastard had retreated. To the victor goes the spoils and Ramsay would burn it to the ground before he forfeited his pirated goods.

“We have the Bolton army on the run, my lord,” Brienne noted. She didn’t looked any better than Tormund did or Jon guessed he did, her lip busted open and a necklace of finger-shaped bruises bisecting her throat, but ever built of loyalty, she pushed her shoulders back and awaited orders. “We’re winning.”

Were they? Was this what that looked like? The trebuchet attendants were loading their last score and those men who could still run desperately did so, abandoning the fight for the refuge behind Winterfell’s walls. If Jon stepped backward his heel landed on a man’s shoulder, to the right a leg and the left a head, a hand, a chest, a hip, the bombs of this minefield buried deep under the ground because destruction and travesty lay atop it.

Jon feared for the rest of his life he’d dream of sleeping on a bed of bodies, that he’d drown in those nightmares every night. War was not the glory Father and his mates joked about it being. War, he was beginning to realize, was the treachery of how to live being one of the ones who survived.

“With no help from those fuckers,” Tormund growled, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and jutting his chin at the wall of Vale knights boxing them in.

They’d stopped since Jon last noticed them, horses tossing their heads and pawing the ground, banners lazily flapped in the dying wind. They had every corner of the fight boxed in, even the whole of Winterfell’s castle. “No,” Jon said, “they’re doing exactly as they were told.”

He, Robb, and Theon had extensively examined the grounds as boys and never once found a tunnel, not even dug out from the crypts. Besieged as they were, if every last Bolton soldier retreated inside and locked the gates and if Ramsay did indeed set his home ablaze, the lot of them would perish inside. And Jon would stand by and do nothing but watch.

“Where’s Davos?” he asked, only realized as he said it that he hadn’t seen the salt-haired man amongst the recurring melee.

Brienne clamped her teeth on her bottom lip, flipped Oathkeeper in her hand and glanced at
Tormund. She inhaled. “He didn’t make it, my lord.”

Oh.

“He was looking after that wolf of yours,” Tormund added, “you know, when he had that little shit in his jaw. A man came up on your wolf and slashed his shoulder open – that’s when the bastard ran like a fucking child – and your wolf ran off, probably somewhere ‘round here, don’t know where, but Davos gutted the man. Took him down. ‘Cept he didn’t see this other bloke coming up behind him.”

Oh.

“Jon!”

Beyond Brienne’s shoulder Theon galloped up, reins knotted together in one hand and an extra horse led by the other. His shaggy hair evenly cut, Jon wouldn’t’ve recognized his childhood playmate had he not heard his voice, a voice he knew blind in the dark as well as he knew Father’s or any of his siblings’. Like the rest of the young men Winterfell reared, Theon had plumps cheeks last Jon saw him, had only just begun to chisel, but the man who beckoned him on the horse had a jaw that could cut glass, the rest of him sharper too, his arms, his shoulders, his eyes. Finally tall. Nary residue of what Ramsay left him as.

“We don’t have time,” he said, clutching the reins as Jon heaved himself into the saddle. Theon steered his steed around, aimed for Winterfell, and the two bumped flanks. “If Ramsay closes the gates we’ll never make it inside.”

True. The catapults vaulted their last trio and, mission complete, the attendants fled, squeezing in with the bulge of others deserting the cause for safety, delayed as they had to realize it was. They were no safer tucked away in the castle’s halls with the madness possessing their lord than they were with those clamoring for their surrender. Because at some point Ramsay would give the order to every gate no matter who remained outside. Good riddance, he’d say and secure the bars in place.

Jon and Theon both knew that, like escaping, getting in afterward was close to impossible.

Heels clicked to their sides, the horses sprouted wings, hooves never touching the ground but soaring. Winterfell grew bigger and bigger and bigger in front of Jon’s eyes, and his mouth watered once more. Not for blood or violence or revenge, but for home, for family, for finally. When he took the kingsroad to Castle Black, admittedly angry and admittedly wanting to run away from Lady Stark’s watchful repression, he never thought he’d see the kingdom’s snowy walls, nevertheless the inside of it, ever again, but now…

Sansa was right; it was their home. His home. His and his and his.

“For Winterfell!” he roared, thrusting his sword in the air, and every man of pledged cloth roared back, pumping their own steel. They fell in line at Jon and Theon’s rear, Greyjoy, Arryn, Glover, Mormont, free folk, all the same, merging together and forming one magnificent flock. One last push, it was all they needed. One last daring, defying, crushing storm to take back what the Starks were robbed of.

The command to close the gates, baton down the hatches, don’t let them through, never hit Jon’s ears, but suddenly men were sealing the North Gate. A half dozen or so nailed their backs to the doors and braced their whole weight against it, feet sliding out from under them but the margin to pass dwindling slimmer and slimmer.
Jon didn’t know if they could burst through, the back entrance already smaller than the others, but he urged his horse faster, beleaguered its sides with furious kicks. Almost there, almost there. The army fell away behind him. Theon struggled to keep pace. Almost there, almost there. One door fit into its frame. Almost there. Jon held his breath. Almo —

He smashed through the gate, flinging the doors off their hinges and shattering them against the walls.

Theon and the army streamed in close behind, and chaos erupted anew. The men attacked with rejuvenated figure, the war near won and everything tumbling towards it, disemboweling and decapitating and rending and riving every man they came across.

Slinging off his horse, Jon ducked and dodged the mayhem, stuck up his sword when necessary, but desperate for Ramsay instead and desperate for Rickon most of all. They were contained in the northernmost courtyard, entrance to the godswood shuttered, women and other innocent bystanders huddling under the plant boxes in the Glass Garden. The doors to the crypts and First Keep were flung open, likely where so many ran for shelter. But where would Ramsay go? Where would he imprison Rickon?

Where where where where where.

“Bastard!”

Jon spun.

His already revulsive face split in a grin as unhinged as his hounds Jon could hear ransacking the kennels, Ramsay eased down the Red Keep’s dim spiral stairwell. Further cursing the people with his presence, he toddled to a stop and listed, weight favoring his right side. Gods, he was hardly standing, hardly anything, raiment in ribbons and skin hanging off his bones. An easy kill if Jon could get close enough.

But Ramsay Bolton’s last remaining heartstring wasn’t what snared Jon’s attention.

A dagger angled at his jugular and Ramsay’s good arm barred across his chest, plastering his arms to his sides, Rickon Stark’s eyes flitted about the inner ward, darting this way and that, panicked by the chaos corrupting his quiet. He’d been so small when the Lannisters came to Winterfell and took his family with them, didn’t even touch Jon’s elbow, a bundle of giggles tripping on a foal’s legs. And now he was tall like his siblings, almost as tall as Jon. Taller than Ramsay, certainly, probably could’ve overpowered the man were he not shaking in fear.

Choking on the old memories and grappling with how to remedy those with this, Jon hazarded a glance up, up, up the tower, to the lone window in the Red Keep. He saw it now, its glow, a candle traded for something else. Of course, he thought. Where else do you hide the youngest Winterfell son but in the decrepit cages whose use was supposed to be discontinued?

He wove towards the pair, swerving around anyone obstructing his view of his little brother. Snapped to a halt only when Ramsay commanded it so. “Don’t come any closer,” he said.

Rickon’s eyes alighted on Jon then, stared. He tested Jon’s name silently on his tongue, brows pinched and trying to remember, trying to place him. Jon knew he never would. He was yet another sibling Rickon lost to the rest of the world far too early, far too young, not yet traumatized, probably no more than a warmth in his memory, maybe a formless haze or a blur.

Jon tried anyway, managed Rickon’s name without cracking and, “Do you remember me?” He
risked a step forward. Ramsay pulled the boy against his chest. “It’s alright if you don’t, but I’m your brother. I’m Jon. Okay? It’s alright, Rickon.”

“Don’t lie to the boy,” Ramsay snorted.

“Shut your mouth,” Jon hissed. “Rickon. Rickon, look at me. It’ll be alright. I promise.” He reached his arms out, palms to the ground, a bend in the elbows, in peace, in peace. Plainly to Ramsay. If anyone noticed the scene occurring in the corner no one intervened. They still had time to end this civilly, to broker a truce without more bloodshed. “Let him go.”

“No,” Ramsay said, a step to his left. “Let’s play a game instead. I’ll match every step you take towards the gate and your little brother comes with. If you step forward at any time, you lose and I kill him. If you make it outside the gate without losing maybe I’ll give him to you. Doesn’t that sound fun, bastard?”

Jon nodded, indulging him.

“That way,” Ramsay directed, to the East Gate.

For once Ramsay honored an agreement; for every step backward Jon obliged he reciprocated one forward. Along the walls and around the perimeter of the rebirthed war, Jon’s fingers skimming the bricks and craggy rock faces, boots breaking hay and snow. A fit of hiccups seized Rickon as they slipped through the tunnel under the Guard’s Wall and into the neighboring inner curtain, likewise vacant of Winterfell’s everyday ménage.

Partitioned from the fight, it was quiet. Private. The perfect place to end this fray once and for all.

“Lord Bolton, I pray you understand I can’t let you leave this castle alive,” Jon said.

“Why is that?” Ramsay asked.

“For the horror you’ve caused my family. For the crimes against your own.” Not just on account of Roose Bolton’s murder, but Walda Frey as well, and that babe she must’ve given birth to by now. If they weren’t dead already then they were locked up somewhere, a crime against the crown to snub the heir of the north’s capital. “Even if you did somehow bested me and made a run for it eight thousand Knights of the Vale surround Winterfell as we speak. Their commander, Lord Royce, has orders to take control of my army if anything were to happen to me,” Jon explained. “You think you have control here, but you do not.”

“I may not have control of the castle, but I have control of you. Don’t I, bastard?” Ramsay hooked Rickon’s chin roughly, chuckling, and Rickon squirmed, jerking away, and that made Ramsay laugh more, laugh louder. His insanity dissolved him.

Jon stuttered a step, careful to keep going, forced himself to keep going. “Don’t hurt him,” he begged.

“Why not?” Ramsay demanded to know. “Because you love your brother? Like you love your ginger sister? I mean, why else would you be here? Without the legitimized Stark name you won’t inherit a thing. You’re the oldest of your surviving siblings and yet you have claim to nothing. This castle isn’t yours, the title isn’t yours – you aren’t even permitted to fly your house’s banner without inverting the colors.”

“None of that matters to me,” Jon claimed, setting his jaw. “I only wanted to take my home back from the filthy thief who stole it.”
Ramsay tilted his head like a bird. “Sansa Stark is my wife,” he reminded Jon. “How am I a thief?”

“Winterfell belongs to Sansa. Not you.”

“I do pity you, bastard,” he sighed. “A bastard is all you’ll ever be.” An idea kindled Ramsay’s charcoals, a surely depraved one, and his eyes brightened to sickening stars. “But we can fix that, you and I. Without Sansa and without your brother here Winterfell is yours for the taking. It’d only take a moment.”

No. Not possible. Please, no.

Rickon’s fear clapped against the bailey walls and he began to fight, the most anguishing howl clawing out of him. He wrenched and twisted, threw his head between the two men and whimpered almost incoherently, his hiccups dampening to sobs. Jon nabbed snatches of the jumble, the broken plea of *don’t kill me, don’t kill me* driving a broadsword through his heart, puncturing it a million times over. How Rickon could think that, how he could believe Jon would ever intend to harm him…

He had to calm Rickon down, had to deescalate his mounting hysteria because it was more ammunition for Ramsay. Ramsay who was smirking and watching every inch of Jon’s toes for the slightest misstep. “Rickon,” Jon tried, and again, “Rickon, it’s alright. I won’t hurt you. I won’t hurt you, I promise.”

It fell on deaf ears. Rickon shook his head and disintegrated into that before little boy as quickly as Lord Karstark had. But Lord Karstark resigned to his fate immediately, and Rickon wasn’t going down with a fight.

“Rickon, please,” Jon pled, and took a step forward.

Closing his eyes, Ramsay exhaled, nice and slow, huffing a laugh on its tail. When he opened his eyes Jon realized what he’d done. “You lose,” Ramsay tsked.

And plunged the dagger in Rickon’s neck.

Blood drained down Rickon’s front, bathing him, tarring him, and Jon lunged to catch the boy. He cracked his knees on the cobblestones, but he didn’t care, propped Rickon up in his lap, clapped one hand to the torrent wound and cradled him in his arms. Rickon stared up at him with wide eyes, looked like a little deer sussed out by the hunting hounds, gurgling on his own blood and struggling past the bubbles on his lips.

Jon’s throat clogged, choked on everything he wanted to say but couldn’t push through. He wanted to weep and pet the boy’s hair and kiss the sorrow away and beg for forgiveness, *please forgive me, I never should have left, I’m sorry I never came back for you, I’m sorry I’m sorry, you were just a boy, we never should have left you, I never should have left you.*

He rocked gently back and forth until Rickon died, eyes open and his mouth stained red like the time he gorged himself sick of a basket of strawberries meant for Lady Stark’s picnic. Jon brushed back his hair — you were just a boy — kissed him on the forehead — I promise I’ll never leave you — and lowered him gingerly to the ground — go be with our family now.

He was just a boy. He was just a little boy.

Ramsay’s feet staggered in Jon’s periphery vision. A thin line divided love and hate, but sorrow and anger were twins, interchangeable and identically devastating. A supernova exploded in his chest, and from it a rage he knew would never die was born. Its fingers flared through his whole body,
tightening his fists that craved a body to break, plugging his chest that heaved short and shallow breaths.

The rage consumed Jon and he liked it.

Frown deeply set and glaring, Jon slowly rose to his feet. Ignoring Theon cautioning his name from somewhere and ignoring the arrow fixed in the shoulder Ghost should’ve ripped from its socket, Jon tackled Ramsay to the ground.

That fury named friend burned holes in his chest and whet his fists to stone, and he attacked blindly. Wailed and pummeled and beat and drubbed his fists, splitting his knuckles on the man’s face. Every swing, every punch, every bone break and blood spritz had a name, had a face. For Rickon. For Sansa. For Theon. Jon did not tire. He did not falter. Like a rabid dog, he obliterated Ramsay’s face to little more than pulp and mush until that face didn’t have a name.

Until Ramsay Bolton disappeared from the world entirely.

Someone eventually intervened, looped their arm under Jon’s arm and around his neck and pulled him off. The cool frame of a fauld, the clink of its mechanics, readily supplied a name in his mind, added a blonde head and a height he couldn’t contend with even in his fevered state. But the blissful sound of Ramsay hacking up blood clot after blood clot appeased his ears, and he went willingly.

They passed Theon situating a bow across his chest and his sister stepping forward to arrest Ramsay. Passed Tormund staring up as snowflakes began to flutter from the sky. None would meet his eye.

None trusted themselves to speak first, to approach what they were each thinking. All of them knew Jon’s behavior was irregular, but only Tormund knew precisely why, and said man distracted himself by catching snowflakes on his tongue.

Once Brienne had carted Jon a suitable distance away, she released him. He turned himself in tight circles like he would an anxious horse, scraped a hand over his head and mangled his bun to shreds. “Get him out of my sight!” he ordered Yara.

She set Ramsay on his knees, instructed Theon to truss him, and then vised the tip of Ramsay’s tongue between her middle and index finger. Drew a knife from her belt and brushing a lock of hair behind her ear, held it to the wiggling leach. Meant to sever his tongue. Meant to render him mute. Every known god would bless her for such generosity.

If not, Jon would do it himself. “Be fast about it,” he said.

Before she could Ramsay began to babble unintelligibly, to slur a whole lot of nonsense they dismissed as the last plights of a dead man walking. Of a man who knew he was a dead man walking. “Do it already,” Tormund yapped, accepted as they all had that they were about to be complicit in such a mutilation.

Yara rolled her eyes and yanked Ramsay’s head closer to hers. Ramsay grew louder, more belligerent, but still none of his words made any sense, if they could be called words. He tried to break out of the pinion, and Tormund darted over to reinforce Theon.

And then Jon heard Sansa’s name.

Wait,” he breathed, stalking back to them. “Wait!”

"My lord, he’s trying to trick you,” Brienne said, quick on his heels.

It didn’t matter. Jon knew the possibility – probability – this trick was just that, a trick, an attempt to
stay his execution, but this was Ramsay fucking Bolton, a master gamekeeper. Why wouldn’t he have another card up this sleeve? Why would he propose murdering Rickon if he didn’t know Sansa was already taken care of? After all, with Rickon gone, the sole loose end to tie up was Sansa.

Sansa.

Jon wrapped his hand around Ramsay’s neck and squeezed. “What did you do to her?”

Even at knifepoint Ramsay giggled, blood streaming from a toothless smile. “Poor little Snow,” he sang. “Couldn’t save his brother and can’t save his sister.”

Oh, Gods, Sansa. No, no, no, no.

Sansa.

"Lock him in the dungeon,” Jon instructed Brienne. To Yara and Theon he said, “Do whatever you want with him, but keep him alive. Sansa will make herself a widow.”

Theon nodded vigorously, urged, “We have him. Go.”

Unbridled fear doused Jon’s rage, infected his chest with raw, the coldest cold he’d felt in his first or second life. *Don’t take her,* Jon thought pleadingly, prayed to the Lord of Light or whoever and bargained his life for hers. *Please don’t take her too.*

Shouldering past his friends, he bolted out of one courtyard and through the next, flung himself on the nearest horse and was gone.

Chapter End Notes

If you need I'm going to be under my covers bashing my head against a book.
it can't be time, I won't say goodbye

Chapter Summary

The wind suddenly carried Wun Wun’s horn into the camp and it caught fire amidst the trees, cheers echoing all around the tent. Desperate for someone to hear her, Sansa screamed and screamed. She thrashed and kicked and slapped whatever of him she could reach, clawed and shredded and ripped like Jon said. Like Jon said, like Jon said, like Pela said.

Chapter Notes

A warning to my readers: the attack on Sansa contains attempted assault and non-consensual touching. If this is a trigger for you, please either skip the scene entirely or skip from “If you do anything to me…” to ‘Smalljon’s touring switched hands’.

Also, the terrific Kitsn0w made this gif for Pompeii that I looked at a lot for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa lost track of time, sequestered in the tent Petyr fashioned in her honor. Had a minute passed since she arrived back at the camp? Had five minutes? Ten minutes? An hour? It felt like she’d paced a century in the ground, a clear tread from one end to the next, all the while questioning how on earth women did this. As a lady patience was expected of her, she knew that, but how did mothers and wives and sisters and queens subdue their nerves enough to quietly wait in a holdfast?

It was the not knowing that frenzied her. The wondering. The imagining. Of all her siblings her imagination was the least wild, the least rampant, roots growing around her legs and only shedding when she thought of Joffrey and crowns and someday. Had she known this was the other side of it, maybe she wouldn’t have cinched onto those wishes so determinedly.

Because now her imagination was wild and rampant, feverish and rabid, tunneling through the earth and to hell. In Jon inhabited one of her heavens then he inhabited one of her hells too, where she watched him die over and over and over again. Where the Red Priestess couldn’t resurrect him because the Lord of Light wouldn’t. Where he died cold and alone in the snow, not again not again not again, not before…

Oh, what use was it thinking about that at a time like this?

She should never be left alone with her own thoughts, although she’d demanded to be left alone, shooing Podrick from the tent with promises to stay put and banishing Petyr from it entirely. The latter had since taken his little lordling to watch the battle from a safe distance. Not even Lady Melisandre had tried her hand at visiting.

Sansa knew being alone was a mistake, too quiet a place to think without anyone to share it with. Without anyone to talk to or expel this nervous energy on. Her prayers and hymns wouldn’t even answer her. She stalked across the room to the closed lappets, tucked one back and peered out for
someone. Anyone. But the sylvan camp fluttered, a couple hundred free folk and knights taking care
to look busy in an effort to trick any lingering Bolton scouts from thinking they were vulnerable to an
attack because their army churned offshore.

Where was the horn? Why hadn’t Wun Wun blown the damn horn yet?

Groaning, Sansa clawed her fingers down the pleated fabric and let it fold back together, once more
concealing her. She pulled the chair from the little vanity table at the far end of the tent and deposited
herself heavily into it. Her knee bumped one of the table legs and the gold candelabra in the top left
corner sputtered, reaching for one of the walls, licking at the shawl she tossed over the lone mirror.
They were gifts from Petyr, the shawl and the plate of polished metal, and how Sansa wished they’d
cought. If the flames were any closer they would have. Any closer and she would’ve hit two birds
with one stone, bringing people into the tent and burning down Petyr’s gesture.

He’d specially outfitted the tent for her. Always for her. Never one to forfeit the opportunity to show
off his ability to provide for her, Petyr meant for the tent to be hers and hers alone, the aggregated
fabrics representing each half of her evidence enough. He certainly didn’t intend to so often find Jon
there or for a second pallet to appear behind the same dressing screen partitioning Sansa’s from the
rest of the room.

It was his own fault, the startle of each discovery. She’d meant her words true, wanted nothing to do
with him, and still he persevered, didn’t understand or didn’t want to accept she favored Jon over
him, that she was devoted to Jon and cherished his devotion to her. Petyr’s demonstrations felt too
opulent now, too manipulative. And his funds were better served elsewhere.

No books to read or games to play, Sansa needed something to pass the time, to distract her from
paying too much attention to time. Bunching her hair over her shoulder, she raked her fingers
through the unsorted tangles, neglected there at the ends from recently unthreading her braid. That
would spend some amount of time, she suspected.

Her bone comb lay on the ornate tabletop beside Houndstooth, the poniard set there absentmindedly
when she shed her skin returning to the tent. Scooping up the comb, her knuckle brushed the
dagger’s cross guard and around it spun until the hilt pointed at her. She culled as much hair in one
hand as possible and poised the comb and –

There was a black hair snagged between its teeth.

Faint but fine, no longer than palm to wrist and whipping up in curls, its black hue jumped out
against the comb’s pristine white. Jon’s, then, kinked and pulled from the night she brushed his hair.
From the night her dumb loose tongue said she loved him.

She moaned pitifully.

What if their plan didn’t work? What if Jon didn’t come back? What if she never saw him again?
What if he –

Stop it, stop it, stop it, she shouted at herself, cursing the illimitable thoughts polluting her head. It did
her no good thinking those things, imagining those things. Cersei Lannister knew that well, made
sense as the very reason why she drowned herself in wine in Maegor’s Holdfast and why she refused
to join Sansa’s prayer circle. She knew it was better to keep her head about her rather than risk losing
–

A hand clapped over Sansa’s mouth.
She seized the intruder’s wrist, bit crescents into his glove as her heart threw forward, letting a scream past her lips. But the hand muffled it, shoved it back down her throat so she choked, her eyes watering and the leather suctioning to her lips as she futilely gulped. Another arm snaked across her front, railing her arms to her side, and clamping her to his taller frame, he hauled her out of the chair. Sansa caught a back board on her heel and the chair clattered after her, an armrest cracking on impact.

The wind suddenly carried Wun Wun’s horn into the camp and it caught fire amidst the trees, cheers echoing all around the tent. Desperate for someone to hear her, Sansa screamed and screamed. Screamed until her throat bled ragged. Screamed though she couldn’t even hear the barely-there sound over her heartbeat frenzying in her ears. She thrashed and kicked and slapped whatever of him she could reach, clawed and shredded and ripped like Jon said. Like Jon said, like Jon said, like Pela said.

“Stop your squirming, girl,” the man hissed, “or I’ll snap your pretty neck.”

He throttled her, shook her as a threat of the worse he’d do to her if she didn’t, and Sansa obediently, limp as the rag doll he wanted her as. His hand slowly, carefully, smudged from her mouth. Sansa whimpered, murmured, “But you’ll do that anyway, won’t you?”

“Not if you’re a good girl,” he refuted. “Will you be a good girl?”

Sansa nodded. Stall him; she had to stall him. If she stalled him long enough someone would poke their head in to check on her. Or, praying to the Old Gods and the New, someone would hear a noise and come to investigate. And they’d find her. And they’d eliminate this person. And she’d be okay. She’d be safe. She just had to stall him long enough to survive.

Clearing her throat and sucking down a breath, she reasoned, “No one has to know you were here. If you let me go and leave I promise not to tell anyone.”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“You don’t have to do this,” she said.

His arm stilled barred across her abdomen, squeezing the life from her, flooding her chest with fear, the man reached towards his belt and unsheathed a dagger no bigger than the bones the wildlings forged theirs from.

He notched the dagger’s tip under Sansa’s chin, and she swallowed, chin trembling. “Please.”

Something cool seeped through her dress, compressed between her back and his front. Something uneven and slightly barbed. Something that crisscrossed the man’s chest in a bulbous X. Something that jingled like…chains? Chains? That didn’t make any sense; they didn’t have any prisoners withheld in their camp and they weren’t close enough to any keep for anyone dripping chains to escape from. Cagily, Sansa turned her head. Her cheek scratched on the man’s jaw, on a bushy gray beard she saw from the corner of her eye.

The mechanics in her mind turned. Chains and a beard. Chains and a beard. Chains… and…

The sons of Winterfell may have been required to memorize every detail of the other noble houses, both those sworn to the Stark seat and those who stood alone, but they weren’t the only ones who did. Sansa studied house words and coats of arms and on a good day would’ve been able to recite any such detail on command, because she was destined to be a queen – or, at the very least, the lady of her house – and queens should be omnipotent in many things, including the history of her
bannermen and the ability to recognize them on sight.

All the better to rule by. All the better to be loved for.

Chains crisscrossing the chest, long beards and even longer manes, those were the Umbers. Only
Smalljon Umber had survived the War of the Five Kings and according to Ser Kyle, only Smalljon
Umber had taken up arms with Ramsay Bolton.

Sansa tamped down the lump in her throat, the hysteria infecting her chest. Her hope someone would
hear her required more time, and a more adept plan. But if no one was coming then she’d have to
rescue herself from the situation. And to do that, to have any hope of doing that, she had to remain
calm. She had to do everything possible to survive.

So she took a deep breath in and steeled herself for next. “Did you hear that horn from before?” she
asked and berated herself for its shakiness. Had to be stronger, had to be a pillar. “That was a signal
for the dozen other houses who’ve pledged their armies to my brother and me. By now your army’s
been surrounded, Lord Umber.”

“Clever girl,” Smalljon breathed, stale in her ear.

“The battle will be over shortly. And then what will Ramsay do to you?” Sansa craned her neck,
tried to catch his eye and hold. Hold. Let him look in the eye of the woman he planned to assault and
kill on order of a lord they both loathed. “It was Ramsay who sent you?”

“Aye, Lady Bolton,” Smalljon confirmed, trailing the dagger down the nape of her neck, to her
clavicle, her shoulder. His hand cupping her left side was as adventurous, slow over her hourglass
curves. “You’ve betrayed his house, and you can never trust traitors. He has no use for you
anymore.”

Sansa flexed her hands. “Your family have been Stark bannermen for a millennia. How can you
betray us in this manner?”

“Such is the price for survival,” Smalljon said. “Besides, the last time my father answered a call for
your family he returned to his family with two fingers missing.”

Repugnant. Vile. What kind of man was at peace with handing his liege lord’s son over to death and
didn’t hesitate in violating his liege lord’s daughter? “If you do anything to me,” Sansa warned, “Jon
will do worse than take two fingers.”

“But he left you here alone. How much affection could you bastard brother truly have for you if he
left you unprotected?”

“He’ll come back.”

Smalljon chuckled. “Is that so? How about, until then, we determine what exactly constitutes
‘anything’.”

That wondering hand of his explored further, trespassed on the land of men before him, on the parts
of her men made their territory. Sansa hated herself for it, but she froze at the contact, at his hand
following the swell of her hips, aware and realizing but paralyzed to her core, couldn’t move her arm
no matter how strenuously she willed it.

His hand slithered leisurely, taking its time, agonizing her, crooked his fingers and dragged her dress
up her thigh, skirt lifting at the ankles, at the calf. Shin. Knee. Sansa clenched her thighs shut as his
hand ventured under her dress and finally cupped her center. “Is it here?” he practically purred in
Sansa’s ear.

Mercifully over before any horror began, his hand escaped from under her dress and traveled back up her body. Sansa shook all over, like the unmitigated quivering from when she vomited spoiled undercooked meat in her garderobe. Smalljon’s fingers tiptoed between her breasts and then her right breast filled his hand. “Or here?”

Smalljon’s touring switched hands; his left wrapped its fingers around her slender neck, pressing the sides to a suffocating degree, while the dagger in his right took its turn scaling her body. The way the blade scraped, it sounded to Sansa like when Father used to shave, the hiss flick of it.

“How would you like to die, clever girl?” he hunted, carving his thumb on the blade and then holding its cold face against her skin. “Should I slit your throat? Puncture an artery and cut your trachea so you can’t cry for help? Or sever your spine so you can’t move?” He angled the blade lower, hovering it over her clavicle, which heaved up towards it as Sansa breathed sharp and shallow. “Or right here, at your pretty neck? You’ll bleed out internally in a matter of seconds.”

Sansa moaned feebly. Why hadn’t anyone come to check on her? Where was Podrick or any of the other sentry Jon assigned to guard her? She sniffled. “You don’t have to do this,” she tried again.

“I know,” Smalljon said, and for the briefest moment hope flickered in Sansa’s hope that he’d surrender, that he’d condemn his task and back away, sneak out the same way he snuck in. But instead his dagger tripped lower, questing her body once more. He tapped the inside of her thigh. “I’ve heard my men speak of a vein here that bleeds quickly. Or maybe…”

Smalljon sighed.

No one was coming, no one was coming, no one was coming, had to tell herself that over and over again so she’d believe it, so it’d spur her. She’d stalled long enough. Sansa’s gaze darted across the tent, to Houndstooth resting in plain sight. It’d take no more than a leap to reach it, to grab it. If she could break out of Smalljon’s grasp she could dive for it. But how would she get free? Never let your enemy recover, Pela said, but what could Sansa do that it’d take a moment for him to recover? That’d let her actually reach Houndstooth?

“Oh maybe,” Smalljon went on, dagger at her belly button now, “I’ll stab you here. I know it to be a slow death, if you hadn’t heard. Excruciatingly slow. Perhaps then you’re beloved bastard brother will find you in time. He’d never be able to save you and you’d die in his arms.”

“You’d never get away with it,” Sansa said adamantly, her voice strong and steady and brave. She had to maintain it, had to stay strong and steady and brave. “He’d hunt you down.”

“You have that much faith in your bastard brother?”

She nodded. Of course she did. Of everything in this world she believed in him above all else. “You don’t know him as I do.”

“Oh I,” a voice said from behind Smalljon.

He whirled around, spinning Sansa with, and in a blur of black and burgundy, Lady Melisandre bashed a water pitcher across his temple.

His legs wobbled and threatened to fail him, but the hit wasn’t hard enough, didn’t pack enough to knock him unconscious, and he managed to stay mostly upright. Touching a hand to his head, to the blood trickling down the side of his face and blending into his beard, his grasp on Sansa loosened, affording her the opportunity she needed.
She slipped from his hold and into a crouch, should’ve vaulted at the vanity table and for Houndstooth but instead watched in horror as Smalljon backhanded Lady Melisandre. The wallop sent her to the ground where she crumbled, tucking herself small. She chanced a look in Sansa’s direction and the women’s eyes locked on each other. Urged each other. To get up, to go.

Sansa clambered through the churned-up mud. Scrambled for her life. For Lady Melisandre’s. If either of them hoped to get out alive.

Almost to the table, arm reaching out, the world rushed out from under her. Smalljon hoicked Sansa off her feet and she smacked to the ground hard, punching the wind from her lungs. He began to drag her backwards by her ankles, smearing her on her stomach, and Sansa sank her fingers in the mud, kicking pointless unless she downed him to her level. But she wasn’t strong enough, not to tackle a full grown man. And Lady Melisandre was still shriveled on the ground.

Smalljon tugged her past the chair and Sansa grappled for it, grabbed hold of the broken armrest and pulled it with. It cracked and then broke free. Sansa pitched the piece at Smalljon. It nailed him dangerously close to the eye, the spike grazing him just shy, and he dropped Sansa’s legs, kicking a tuft of grass as he held his eye and roaring at her. Yes, yes, Sansa exclaimed, make noise. Make noise and let them hear. Let them come running.

She had to make more noise, more, more, more. Pivoting onto her back, pleading it not be heavy, Sansa grasped the whole chair and hurled it up and over her head at Smalljon.

The chair shattered against his back, but it elicited no more than a growl from him. Sansa lunged back to the vanity table and snatched up Houndstooth, wrapping her fingers sturdily around the decorative hilt and grateful only then for the lack of a sheath. A hand twisted in her hair from behind, threading so deep and tight that with a single pull Sansa heard her neck pop as she was reined in like a bloody horse. Tucking Houndstooth to her body, she held onto the tables opposite length so when Smalljon jerked on her, felling her on her behind, the table toppled over with her. Its crash made a horrible sound, the best sound. Someone had to hear it. Hear the crashing and the clattering and if all else failed, hear Sansa screaming as Smalljon dragged her backwards by her hair.

“Do you know what happens to clever girls?” he asked her, stopping but lugging her until she landed on his shoes, at his feet, at his mercy.

He roughed her to her feet, and Sansa felt her hair tear from her scalp. Felt the dagger tip as it returned to her neck. Blood dribbled freely from his temple, from his eye, staining worse his already horrid face. Sansa would see that face in her nightmares, right alongside the other devils of her seven hells. At least this one she could squash personally. Firstly.

Smalljon pushed her closer to him. “Do you know what happens to clever girls?” he growled again, answered this time with, “They die.”

“But not before you,” Sansa retorted, and stabbed him in the juncture between shoulder and neck.

His mouth fell open, and right then and there Sansa decreed no, the monster in his face would not populate her nightmares and her hells, but this would instead. Every spectrum of emotion registered on his face, and she’d cherish the horrified expression the most, the longest. Like Ramsay when she someday served the same punishment.

She twisted Houndstooth, digging it deeper, pillaging his essence faster, and Smalljon’s eyes bulged in his head. The dagger crashed to the ground and then his body followed. Barely a trickle seeped out of the entry wound, but Sansa had heard some things in her various accommodations too and she knew Smalljon was right. The blood didn’t leach out but filled him from the inside. Drowned him
from the inside.

She knew he had minutes, if that. And then he’d be gone.

He’d be dead.

Because she killed him.

She killed him. She killed someone. She was a killer. Like the rest of them. Like all the other monsters in this world.

Sansa’s heart thudded erratically and her chest tightened. Skin boiled. Absolutely couldn’t breathe. She gasped for air, desperately gulping what little she wasn’t denied, and stuttered back several steps until the back of her legs hit the overturned table. She collapsed, smacked her head on an edge and saw stars dance over her head.

The flames in the candelabra had snuffed out in the fall, thank the Gods of Old and New. Nothing had caught on fire. Nothing had burned down. No one could see what she’d done. No one could see who she killed.

She killed someone. Oh Gods, oh Gods, oh Gods.

Lady Melisandre rushed towards, her breeze ruffling Sansa’s skirt, and dropped instantly to her knees. She tentatively touched a hand to Sansa’s shoulder. “Lady Sansa, are you alright?” she asked, her brow pinching. Unblinking, Sansa’s head lolled to the side. “Lady Sansa? Lady Sansa!”

He did only have minutes left, but they were long minutes. His chest finally relinquished its life, but his eyes, gray and empty even when he breathed, never did. Those eyes held Sansa hostage, haunted her, paralyzed her as his hands had, as if he could still come after her so long as she was the last thing he saw in this world.

That she was, indeed, the last person he saw before the poniard in his chest stopped moving and his eyes vacated her and the wind shaded him in blue did little to comfort Sansa. Neither she nor Lady Melisandre stirred from where they shriveled, kept to each other while they waited, one awful minute at a time. What they were waiting for – for someone to poke their head in as she’d begged for the past hour or for Smalljon to spring up again or whatever – Sansa wasn’t sure.

They did need to find someone, to gather their wits about them and their feet underneath them. Find someone. Tell someone. The thought corroded Sansa’s tremors, curved them to utter stillness, the mortification of what she’d done cementing her as a statue. Someone had to be informed of the incident and the almost assassination and the man carrying out the sentence, but how was she expected to explain what happened? Smalljon Umber was the lord of a respected house, even if he wanted to lock his chains around a Stark rather than a Bolton.

She murdered a lord. How would she explain that to anyone?

How would she explain that to Jon?

What would he think of her on next sight, mud-stained and her hands wet with someone’s blood? She felt more ruined than when she first arrived at Castle Black, a victim of rape and torture because at least she hadn’t been this. At least she hadn’t been a murderer. Would Jon wrinkle his nose and think her foul? Turn away and never look at her again? They’d been so close to something before, to maybe finally happiness that the very of thought of her new state repulsing him aggrieved her to the
A hand brushed over her shoulder and Sansa jumped. “Lady Sansa,” Lady Melisandre said gently, “can I get you anything? Water, perhaps?”

Sansa shook her head, struggling for the words, and twitched the woman’s hand off. She immediately thought to apologize for it, didn’t intend to be so admittedly callous and rude. “Thank you,” she managed, though she stuttered still, “but I—”

Like the cheers tailing the horn, cries slipped between the lappets of Sansa’s tent. They were indistinguishable at first, low murmurs, uncertain and unbelieving, as if Queen Daenerys’ dragons had suddenly flown their shadows over the camp. But then, with a clatter of hooves, they found their footing out of the bruit and their jubilance was activated, reverberating Lord Commander Snow! amidst the applause.

It magnified in Sansa’s ear, the name she worried her lip on but her heart leapt for, braced her hands on the ground at her sides and readied to spring. Her breath hitched as boots thumped closer, scared to utter his name in case they were wrong. In case they were mistaken and it wasn’t him, it wasn’t Jon, her Jon, because he died somewhere on that field and either Ser Davos or Tormund were coming to break the news to her instead.

But it was.

Jon Snow burst into the tent, and a happiness that only their reunion at Castle Black could rival in brightness consumed her. Revived her. His fearful gaze skittered rapidly around the tent, hair flown from its bun and every inch of him scuffed as muddy and bloody as she but there he stood, alive. Alive. All she wanted, all she prayed and hoped and begged he be when he came back to her.

His name fell out of her mouth, but he didn’t hear her. Or see her, gawking down at the body, at the furnishing in pieces, at the body again, startled by the tent’s unannounced demolition.

“Jon,” Sansa said again, hiccupped it more like, and he snapped to.

Relief buckled his whole body at the sight of her, breathing her name as he stepped over Smalljon Umber. The look of him, the way he whispered her name, everything else he whispered, the sweet girl and darling and my love quavering beneath the surface, it broke Sansa. She clambered to her feet, hot tears gushing down her cheeks, and rushed to him, distended with her own sentiments.

They collided in two strides.

Jon clutched Sansa as fiercely as she tied her arms around his neck, cupped the back of her head and spun them around. Her back to the body, to what she did, Sansa nestled her face deeper against Jon’s neck, blocked out everything, all of it, colored in every space of her world with him: his arms, his smell, his warmth, his heartbeat battering at hers, his juddered exhales tickling her cheek.

I'm alive, her breath promised, steadying now that he held her.

I couldn’t leave you, her fingers swore, pulling apart his hair bind and raking his crusted tangles back.

My mind is full of you, she wanted to say, felt him shudder in her arms and knew his eyes were closed, closed hers as well.

She could’ve retired the day right then and there, could’ve taken Jon with her to the pallet in the tent or a bed on the forest floor or the heavy furs in the lord’s chamber or wherever. She didn’t care.
where they decamped so long as they went knitted exactly as they were, snug together, falling asleep to his heartbeat under her ear and her breath assuredly rising. They’d sleep away the ache in their bones, no one permitted in the room on her order. And when she couldn’t sleep she’d watch, keep anymore demons from lurking on his dawn.

What a perfect, blessed dream.

But too soon Jon remembered himself and his place, passed a look at their company witnessing the affair from the side and slid his hands up to Sansa’s shoulders, her nape. She unwound from him too, letting out a shaky breath as he rested his forehead on hers. “I thought Ramsay stole you a second time,” he murmured just for her, brushing their noses. “I didn’t know what I’d do if he succeeded.”

“He almost did,” Sansa said.

Though she couldn’t see the body, its memories swam in the new splashes of water threatening to follow the already-sown tracks down her cheeks. They were blurs, the memories, hazes really, but fragments enough. She knew the face that broke to the surface, smelled his stank, felt his touch and his humid breath and the blade he crooked to her throat.

She hadn’t realized how close she’d been, how she fought her own battle, won her own war.

And now she had to learn how to live with surviving. Harder to do than it sounded, she knew, its impossible knife keeping close on her.

Jon thumbed away the tears and then his hands dipped once more, playing along the small of her back. She dropped her head on his shoulder and curled a finger in his collar. He asked, “Can either of you tell me what happened here?”

“This man attacked Lady Sansa,” Lady Melisandre explained, laced up to her lap and chin respectfully bowed. She meant to appeal to Jon, as though preemptively. “I suspect he was tasked with killing her. I came to investigate a sound and luckily I intervened before he had a chance to succeed. If I hadn’t…if I hadn’t Lady Sansa would be dead.”

Sansa nodded in agreement. “Ramsay sent him,” she confirmed. “He called me a traitor to the Bolton house and said Ramsay didn’t have a use for me anymore. And then he played with me. Tried to make me guess where he’d stab me. He picked my stomach so I’d still be alive when you found me. So you couldn’t save me.”

If Jon boiled red under the blood caking his face she didn’t see it, but she saw his nostrils flare. She saw his brows crunch and his eyes harden, smoldering anger slashing through the black pools he turned sharply on Lady Melisandre. Sansa caught an arm around his waist before he stomped on her, but even halfway across the room he raged, shaking with it.

“You said your spell would protect her!” he fumed. “Why didn’t it protect her?”

And that image of power, of strength and influence Sansa held Lady Melisandre to disintegrated before her very eyes. “I’m sorry, my prince,” Lady Melisandre stammered. Disgraced by her deity’s most prized soldier, she evacuated the tent, dress fluttering on her heels.

Jon returned his attention to Sansa, smoothed of his wrath, not a hint of it creasing his face that she wondered if she imagined his outburst, or at least the severity of it. “I would have saved you,” he vowed, corralled her close and set his forehead on hers again. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” she rushed out, cupping his cheek and kissing the other one.
“Then tell me true,” he begged her. “Did he do anything else? Did he touch you? Did he degrade you?”

How would telling him the truth benefit either of them? It’d merely incite his rage, neutralize his rationality and any hope of a clear-headed response. She’d seen it for herself, after all, his short fuse and his ungovernable anger, things she never associated him with as a girl because that wasn’t the boy she grew up with. She remembered an evenly-tempered young man who never so much as glared at someone who perturbed him. Their time away from Winterfell and in the real world gave birth to many things, but it was his resurrection that skinned him raw. That incensed him.

Sansa peeked over her shoulder at Smalljon Umber’s body. “It doesn’t matter if he did. He’s dead,” she said matter-of-factly. “I killed him. I killed someone, Jon.”

“No, you did what was necessary to survive.”

Tearing from her side, Jon stalked over to Smalljon’s body, straddled a foot on either side of the man, and, without thought or hesitation, pulled Houndstooth free. Blood trickled from the entry, leaked into Smalljon’s clothes. Jon scraped the blade clean on his leathers, no different from the many other swings and swats already repainting him.

He waved the dagger in Sansa’s face. “This is how you survived. When the choice is between you and someone else, you choose yourself.”

“But—”

“Every time, Sansa.” He pocketed the dagger. Grasped Sansa by the shoulders. “I’ve already lost Rickon and I—”

Sansa started, blinked at him. “Rickon?”

Once Jon and Sansa expired all they’d been through since they saw each other last they moved on to where they believed the rest of their siblings were, landing most often on Rickon and his fate. He was so small when they left him, a mere boy. A child. Like the impossibility of everything else in Winterfell under Ramsay’s rule, their hope of him getting out alive dwindled, something they only said aloud in the dark and in the quiet where it finally felt safe. What would realistically become of him stopped being theories somewhere along the way and became certain. Inevitable.

But to hear they’d been right, to have it confirmed though Jon refused to repeat the heartbreak…

Sansa’s gaze sank to the ground, barely heard Jon continue with their casualty count. “Davos is gone. Wun Wun as well.” She heard him swallow. “A mounted soldier was coming right at me and he just…swept him aside. He had my back and it put him right in the range of Ramsay’s catapults. The giants are all extinct.”

“His death is my responsibility. I asked him to protect you,” Sansa admitted.

“But he didn’t have to. He chose to.”

An argument assembled in her throat, denying his shoulders that responsibility because it was her fault, not his, she the one who asked that circle to do just that, to circle Jon and keep him safe and bring him home. He was right that Wun Wun didn’t have to, that Ser Davos didn’t have to and Brienne didn’t have to, but she knew each of them did. Not because she asked it of them but because they believed in Jon, in what he could do and what he would do, enough to get him to the other side.

They had to live with the consequences of their actions, but the last thing Sansa wanted was for Jon
to brood and wad through the guilt for things that were out of his control. Like Wun Wun’s death. Like Ser Davos’. Like Rickon’s.

Sansa held out her hand to him, twinkling her fingers in beckoning, and Jon placed his hand in hers. She squeezed and refused to let go. “What did you mean earlier?” she asked cautiously. “When you asked Lady Melisandre why it didn’t work? What didn’t work?”

“I…” Jon sighed, tried to take back his hand, but Sansa held on, wrapping her fingers around his thumb if that was all he’d give her. “When she gave you the comb I asked her to place a spell of protection on you. To keep you safe in case something like this”—he gestured to her would-be assassin—“happened.”

She smiled, small and watery, head at a fond tilt. “It was a very sweet thought, but she’d never protect me, Jon. You’re her prince that was promised. She’d do everything in her power to bring you home safe, not me. And she did.” Sansa tugged him closer, to near flush against her. She felt his breath ghost her lips and it thrilled her. “She brought you home to me.”

“I suppose she did.” And he laughed a little, pressed his cheek against hers and locked his wrists around her neck. Her arms tethered around his middle, fingers interlocking in a fist. “I thought I’d arrive too late. I feared you dead,” he confessed quietly. Sansa felt his cheeks pull up, thought him smiling, and he was, drawing back to cup her face in his hands. “But you protected yourself. I’m quite proud of you.”

She smiled too, abashed color suffusing her cheeks, and Jon kissed those cheeks, kissed her forehead, between the eyes, her nose. Her lips. Both startled, flinched reflexively. Arms and hands and bodies to themselves. Sansa stared at him with wide eyes. Refrained from touching her lips to feel the kiss’ lingering tingle, couldn’t wholly compute, couldn’t entirely fathom that he…that they…

Air whooshed at her, froze her, and she blinked. Scrubbing the base of his neck, eyes not daring to meet hers, Jon prattled on and on, noticeably shrinking. “I’m so sorry, Sansa. I’ve dishonored you. Seven Hells, I’m sorry.” Over and over the same thing, softer and faster.

Sansa’s brow pinched in confusion. Dishonored her? Offended her? How could he think such erred things about himself? How could he think that was anything worse than everything she wanted once she realized her feelings towards him were more amative and certainly not sisterly? She wanted his oceans and his heavens, his body and his heart and his soul, and his honor – that blasted honor – imperiled him into believing he’d offended her for giving precisely that?

She wouldn’t stand for it. If those were her sins, pray, give them again.

Not a thought stringing together in her head, Sansa shaved the space between them, clasped a hand on the back of Jon’s neck, and guided his lips back to hers.

He tasted salty and metallic at the same time. And she loved it. If their first kiss was doomed to be their last, she’d have this stolen moment for always. Have his light sheen of sweat and the blood coating his lips, two things her past self would’ve balked at but now she found didn’t much matter to her, rather favored actually. It was the taste of his life, that he was alive and he was with her.

She’d have his fingertips sitting lightly on her jaw as he kissed her back, tentative and nervous, thought he’d break her perfect porcelain if he pressed too hard, if he dug too deep. Not even the softest moan inspired him to light a fire under his passion, to give in to what he wanted. Because she wanted it too, wanted him too, pressed herself against him and fisted a hand in his hair and peeked
out her tongue to coax him and –

“Lord Commander Snow!”

They jumped apart. Sansa pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, set her other upon her chest. She felt Jon staring at her, but she kept her gaze regimented elsewhere, at the candelabra she’d overturned, at the mirror now uncovered. Anywhere but back at Jon. She didn’t have his answers. She wouldn’t know how to explain them in any sane way if she did.

The voice came again, muffled, unsure, following protocol and not entering the tent until invited, thank the Gods. “Lord Reed has arrived back at camp and has asked for an audience with you,” the soldier said.

Jon cleared his throat, replied, “Yes, tell him I’ll be out shortly.” To himself he muttered, “Things to discuss.”

“I will, my lord.”

They waited until the soldier’s footfall faded, blending in, same as all the others. No closer to the tent than anyone else. No closer to hear whatever it was Jon opened his mouth to say but thought better of before he did. He didn’t have to say it; Sansa knew what it was. It’s a sin. You’re my sister. We’ll be killed. The very things holding itself over her heads and thus the very thing she’d tried telling herself to convince her feelings the other way. The appropriate way.

Attempting a smile, sad as it ended up, Sansa pulled her dress sleeves as far as they’d stretch and clenched the cuff in her palm. She set herself to task, clearing as much blood from Jon as would come off without a proper bath, and he held still for her, surprisingly. Stared at her, searching her face while she wiped the battle away until his pale skin shone through and he looked more akin to normal.

“Go,” she encouraged, veering around him and pushing at his back. “Go celebrate your victory with the lords.”

“Our victory,” he corrected.

Sansa nodded, ducking her head and mashing her lips. Her fingers twitched towards his, coursed through with some indefinable need to touch him, to feel him touch her. To know he wasn’t mad at her. That he didn’t hate her. She’d understand if he did. How else did she expect him to react to a woman who kissed her brother?

He sighed, took her hand. “Sansa—”

“It’s alright,” she hastily said, giving that sad little smile again. “I’ll pack our belongings and meet you in Winterfell. Go.”

Jon didn’t let go, not all at once, and Sansa’s heart stuttered. A step back and back, holding until the last possible second, their fingers skimmed over the many lines of each other’s palms until at last their fingertips grazed one another’s. Sansa’s hand tingled as her lips did.

Over the body and a hand in the tent’s folds, Sansa said Jon’s name, stopping him. He turned, she tipped her head, and finally her smile was one of amazement. “We’re going home.”
Okay, did I flub their first kiss? I feel like I flubbed it.
with your kiss my life begins

Chapter Summary

How he wanted to kiss her again, but only if she consented her permission to be kissed.

Or maybe he was mixed wrong like all the other Targaryens. Did wanting her make him wrong?

“You’re lying.”

Lord Reed slurred on his feet. “How would lying to you benefit me?” he asked, head cocked and absentmindedly picking at a scrap of cloth tied around his left bicep.

“I’m not sure,” Jon admitted. He glanced up, squinting through the forest’s naked fingers, a flake catching on his nose. It’d begun to snow harder on his quest to find the man, sheets and sheets of white nearly blinding his path, obscuring the camp’s faces and thus inhibiting his search, and had yet to subside, mantling their shoulders. “Perhaps your isolation at Greywater Watch has left you with ample time to make up fantastical stories and follow any flight of fancy. And your drinking—”

“I drink,” Lord Reed thundered, chest heaving with it, “because Ned Stark left me responsible for his secrets!”

Though they were well out of earshot of the camp and its prying ears, Jon froze, checking past him to the huddles of black shapes. Preparing to migrate from the tree coverage to behind friendly walls, the men clanked about noisily, nothing to fear now, no one to be wary of and no one to hear them. Without Tormund or Davos and Podrick sent on with Sansa, there wasn’t anyone to hear Lord Reed’s outburst, either. Still Jon cautioned, “Please keep your voice down.”

Lord Reed snorted. Pointed an accusing finger. “When Ned chose to take you as his own he made me swear to take your parentage to my grave because he wanted to be the one to tell you the truth. And then he died and left me alone in this.”

“So why wait until now?” Jon beckoned, flapping his arms. “He’s been dead for a few years. You’ve had ample time to unburden yourself.”

“You wouldn’t question my timing if you had any idea what it’s like to be solely responsible for changing someone’s life when they never asked for it to be altered.”

While the pillars of Jon’s certainty hadn’t yet fragmented (and why should they, for this message – this story, exactly what it had to be because no one kept such a paramount secret as harboring a Targaryen, most of all Ned Stark and least of all from his wife and his king and Jon himself – was as tall as any of Tormund’s tales), hearing Lord Reed’s sigh, watching snow float off his shoulders as they slumped, it was enough to pause any argument left in Jon’s arsenal.

Lord Reed shook his head. “I wish I were lying,” he said quietly, almost inaudibly. “You don’t understand how much I wish that. So many people we loved would still be here. So many lives would have been saved.” He smacked his lips and met Jon’s gaze and the defeat evaporated from his weathered body. “But wishing for something different does not change what’s already occurred.
You grew up with Ned’s stories of the Tower of Joy, but he always left something out.”

“Like what?”

“He and I were not the only survivors, Jon, because you were born there, on that very day.”

Yes, a tall tale indeed. Jon sighed. “No. I was born in Dorne while my father fought in Robert’s Rebellion.”

“The Tower of Joy is in Dorne,” Lord Reed said. “Your mother was Lyanna Stark—”

“My mother was a tavern serving girl.”

“That’s what Ned told you! That’s what he wanted you and everyone else to believe,” Lord Reed espoused. He took a hesitant step forward, face puncturing through the raining snow. “He invalidated you and hid you your entire life not because you were a bastard he was ashamed of but because you’re a Targaryen his sister begged him to protect. Had Robert Baratheon discovered you before Ned did he would’ve killed you before your first breath.”

Jon inched his face closer to the man’s, practically spitting on his boots. “I don’t believe you.”

“A man who doesn’t believe is a man who doesn’t understand. What is it you don’t understand?”

Unable to think of where to begin, he paced, treading trenches through the powdered earth. He’d grown up with these stories, that of the Tourney of Harrenhal and the Tower of Joy and Rhaegar Targaryen’s ruby ford death at the Battle of the Trident and the Mad King’s downfall, history he was taught same as Robb, same as Theon and Sansa and Arya and Bran. Their family’s participation in the Targaryen defeat was applauded and feted, the house’s greatest accomplishment.

But if there was any credence to Lord Reed’s word…did that mean the man who raised him was the same man who helped kill his trueborn father? The same man who welcomed said killer into their home?

“Rhaegar Targaryen abducted and raped Lyanna Stark,” he stated aloud.

“A popular theory, one postulated by Robert Baratheon,” Lord Reed refuted. “Robert was set to marry Lyanna, and then at the Tourney of Harrenhal—”

“Rhaegar bypassed his wife and crowned Lyanna the new queen of love and beauty,” Jon recited, celebrating spring and the White Swords knighting Jaime Lannister as their newest member. “I know all of that.”

“Ned always said that was the moment when all the smiles died.”

Lord Reed’s expression softened, took on a wistfulness Jon would’ve attributed to ale if he didn’t know the man somewhat flushed himself clean for the morning’s battle. He almost called the look affectionate. Loving. “Did you know that’s how I met your family? I was small for my age – still am,” Lord Reed laughed, “and these squires who were quite bigger began to bully me. Your mother intervened. She set me back on my feet and introduced me to her brothers and went with me to the opening feast that night.” He inhaled slowly and then smiled at Jon, nostalgia twinkling its tail. “She was a good, kind woman. As brave as any of her brothers. I wish you’d known her. She would have been proud of you. Both of them would have, I’m sure.”

Proud of what, Jon wanted to know. What had he accomplished to warrant pride? He’d done nothing important in the eyes of the king or the rest of the realm. He was known throughout as a
bastard. And if Rhaegar Targaryen was his father – that magnificent, titanic if – how was he expected to live up to such a man? Such a name? The unlikelyhood of it pricked Jon, resolutely knew in his heart that he couldn’t. After today he knew he’d have trouble enough feeling worthy of a place in Winterfell, not to mention feeling worthy enough of Sansa.

Sansa.

Gods, what did this mean for her? Bastard or legitimate, true or not true, if he wasn’t Ned’s then she was heir apparent. Wasn’t harboring a Targaryen, even an adult one, too dangerous? Robert Baratheon may be dead, but what would the Lannisters do if they discovered him? What would anyone do? Hadn’t he heard someone mention Daenerys Targaryen freeing Essos and her ambition of conquering Westeros? What would she do if Lord Reed’s tale were true?

Perhaps he shouldn’t tell Sansa. Not yet. Not until he knew for certain.

But what if he never knew for certain? If Lord Reed was the last witness to his birth would the Citadel have correct record of him?

He needed to confide in Sansa. He loved her, he trusted her, and he couldn’t risk losing their connection by lying. She needed to know, even if these were merely suspicions and suspicions forever.

The men deployed behind Lord Reed, camp packed up and balanced on their backs. Jon needed to go with them. “All my life I wanted to know my mother,” he said. “I hoped to meet her someday. If you speak the truth, do you mean to tell me she’s been in the crypts under my feet this whole time?”

“It was never safe for you to know,” Lord Reed said. “Rhaegar and Lyanna knew that. Ser Arthur Dayne and the rest of Rhaegar’s kingsguard weren’t at the battles on the Trident, but it wasn’t because they were protecting Lyanna. They were protecting you, the future king. The rightful heir to the Iron Throne.”

Jon shook his head. “I don’t want it.”

“No one wants the fate they’re assigned.”

And it won’t be him you have to convince, a voice told him. In a world where everyone wanted to rule, it’d no doubt be the one who wanted nothing to do with the sword seat that the rest of the realm pulled into the fray.

Jon shuffled past Lord Reed, feet sinking into the thickening snow, then stopped. Turned. Quirked a brow at the man. “Why should I trust you?”

“Why can’t you?” Lord Reed asked instead. “I’m the last witness you have, Jon Snow.”

“Why can’t you?” Lord Reed asked instead. “I’m the last witness you have, Jon Snow.”

“And I am sorry for you.” Jon’s gaze followed the line of soldiers trekking out from the trees and into the campestral, like ants marching single file back to their queen, not knowing a carpet of their fallen comrades awaited them. Or maybe they did and they wanted to see it anyway. “Go to Winterfell and get some rest, Lord Reed,” Jon suggested, “but don’t leave until I say so. I’ll have more questions.”

Targaryen? Targaryen?

Not a Snow and only half a Stark. Son of the Wolf Maid and the Silver Prince. Grandson of the Mad
King. Nephew of her Majesty, Queen Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea and Mother of Dragons.

Jon Targaryen.

What utter lunacy.

His mind couldn’t riddle it, no way, no how. Rigorously refused. There was absolutely no space for the concept, not enough room in his thoughts atop everything else competing for – no, demanding his attention. And yet, there it stayed, badgering him to Winterfell and through it and around it, long after the castle’s retinue of servants cobbled together dinner and the sun began to set on the long and bloody day.

Trying to distract himself otherwise, Jon busied himself with the closest mundane aftereffects of war. Whether his scurries were in an attempt to keep from thinking about the possibility he was a dragon raised by wolves or to avoid the Lord’s Chamber he insisted Sansa harvest for herself (one of the many things they’d fussled over in the battle’s preceding days), Jon didn’t know. Or didn’t care, more like. As long as it did what he wanted.

The lords who weren’t toasting to their victory in the Great Hall had already retired to the Guest House, but it was the soldiers Jon stopped in on. Camps littered every surface of the castle, combustng the corridors, huddled in nooks and crevices, established in the godswood and outside the city walls, packed in and nuzzling each other. Navigating so many proved an arduous task, to double on the morrow once the free folk were retrieved. Per Sansa’s instruction, the men were provided a hearty meal and Jon made sure to add to it, extending a first token of his appreciation with extra blankets and firewood and enough drink to fire their bellies.

Sloughing to the moon’s full height, the hours felt like they dragged on, and after a while Jon worried so many sudden guests would overwork the staff. But they bustled about almost merrily, energetic instead of overwhelmed, seemed excited to serve the Starks again if the beams and curtseys were any indication. More than a few halted Jon in a hall or as he passed through a door, their hand on his arm and bulbs in their cheeks. They shook his hand, patted his back, hugged him. Thanked him: for defeating Ramsay, for restituting Winterfell, for freeing Sansa.

More often than not it was Sansa they were most grateful for.

Bolton banners lay in heaps throughout the inner wards, buried under the snow and next on the pyres the moment Jon’s men finished burning the dead. Distended black columns spiraled into the quilted gloaming sky, and Jon paused on the gangway to the Great Keep to watch, for the first time not bothered by the particularly pungent odor as his eyes followed the tendrils up, up.

At once his and Lord Reed’s conversation returned to him. He wrung the balustrades.

In his mind he held an image of the man he called Father, honor erecting him tall, an architectural majesty of honesty and bravery and virtue. Even if what Lord Reed said was true, even if Ned Stark deceived his whole family and the whole realm for the love of his sister, this one chip didn’t befoul that image. This one little fallacy didn’t shrink the man. One lie didn’t mean Ned Stark couldn’t be trusted.

Jon had to keep reminding himself that. He had to reiterate it over and over and over again until they were like his house’s words.
He grunted and shoved off the rails, stomped inside and stuck to the walls as he wound the corridors towards Sansa’s chambers. Since leaving the camp he’d decided indefinitely to relay Lord Reed’s tale to her and beg her conference, insist her opinion on the matter and what it meant for him. And what it meant for her. It’d either directly or indirectly affect her, after all, depending on her one-word answer to his question.

If she said no and the kiss was an act in the heat of the moment, a side effect of her relief to be alive and her relief to find him alive, if it was an accident, a nothing, then he’d agree to forget it ever happened and never speak of it again.

But if she said yes…

If she said yes, and if he was indeed of Targaryen ancestry (and oh, how his forward life burgeoned on that if), then Sansa was his former sister and true cousin and wanting her wasn’t impure or a crime. He wouldn’t be shunned or banned or incarcerated. They could love one another without persecution, raise their children without fear of retaliation, live the rest of their days quietly in the north.

How he wanted to kiss her again, but only if she consented her permission to be kissed.

Or maybe he was mixed wrong like all the other Targaryens. Did wanting her make him wrong?

“Lord Commander Snow,” a voice echoed from behind him.

Jon groaned low in his throat; he did not have the mood for anymore visits, least of all from whom that voice hissed. He wanted to keep going, pass an excuse of exhaustion over his shoulder and just swoop around the last two corners to the Lord Chamber’s door. But he know Lord Baelish would inevitably follow. Especially if he counted on Jon leading him to where Sansa cached herself on this most victorious of nights.

Easing into the light offered by a lit wall torch, Lord Baelish slipped away from the cranny loop window Jon had sped past but not see, a ghost from the shadows of his black mantle and tapping his fingers together in his lap. Left alone to converse for the very first time, neither Jon nor Lord Baelish bowed, merely stared, silent of customary pleasantries.

And then Lord Baelish asked, “Is it true? Was Sansa attacked today?”

“She was,” Jon confirmed, though he wondered how and from who Lord Baelish received the information and what was exchanged for it. Outside of Jon and Sansa only Melisandre and Podrick knew of Lord Umber’s whereabouts, wrapped and bound in a cloth shorn from the tent walls and then chucked for the snow to bury for them.

But it was an Arryn tent, Jon rationalized, and Lord Baelish was a miser, if little else; Jon wouldn’t be surprised to know Lord Baelish kept an inventory of every bolt of fabric at his dispense.

“By Smalljon Umber on assignment of Ramsay Bolton,” Jon continued. “But she survived and is doing as well as can be expected under the circumstances.”

The gray worm atop Lord Baelish’s lip scrunched, and he knotted his hands painfully. “I do confess I feel responsible for what happened to her today. I intended to remain in her company during the battle, but she made her wish to be left alone very clear and I obliged her. I now realize I should not have.” He peered up at Jon. “Lady Brienne refused my entrance to Sansa’s room. Will you permit me? May I see her? To see for myself that she is alright?”

“The battle is not yet a day old, Lord Baelish,” Jon said, his shoulders sagging. “Everyone needs
their rest, including but not limited to Lady Sansa. She’ll accept visitors in the coming days, but not tonight.”

House Arryn aiding Jon and Sansa’s campaign by way of Lord Baelish’s persuasion did little to warm Jon to him. Not in the slightest, not in the least, actually. Between the secrets Sansa was privy to and what turned out to be almost everyone’s personal encounters with the man, how could Jon feel anything favorable towards Lord Baelish? Not a speck of him was respectable and maybe only a couple were admirable.

Before Jon stood a man who only knew how to be a man inside the protected walls of a castle, who knew nothing of fighting for more lives than his own. Before Jon stood a man who still thought himself deserving of a lady like Sansa and who actually thought himself – above all people – worthy of acceptance into her company after so fraught a day.

Gods, Jon wanted to laugh at him sometimes.

Instead he pivoted on his heels, cloak fanning out on his legs. He made it down the corridor, skimming his fingers along the cold and cragged stone, drew back and they were dusty with it. Nails jagged too. The castle’s din faded behind him and he faintly heard Brienne’s shuffling when Lord Baelish stopped him one last time. “But that is where you’re going, isn’t it? To Sansa’s chambers?” he suspected.

The man flirted with Jon’s temper. Jon wondered if he knew just how close to the flint he repeatedly struck. “Not that it’s any of your business,” he said, angling around, “but yes. We lost good men and close friends today, but we also lost our brother. We wish to mourn in private, something I’d hoped even you would understand.”

“Of course, Lord Commander Snow. Take all the time you need,” Lord Baelish said glibly. “I assume Sansa mentioned the advice I gave her.”

“Your suggestion she marry Robin Arryn? Yes, she told me. She’s told me everything you’ve ever said. Everything you’ve ever done.”

He dipped his head atwitch. Slithered out of the light’s full illumination and into the crisscrossing shadows. “Witnessing the pair of you interact as of late I don’t doubt the truth of that statement. You’ve become quite close since reuniting, haven’t you, Lord Snow? You’ve matured from your childish dislike of one another and into something resembling a family.”

Jon narrowed his eyes. “We’ve had to, haven’t we? You’ve taken so much of my family. Why would I let you have her, too?”

“Because you want what is best for her,” Lord Baelish replied, “and marrying the Arryn lordling is what’s best for her.”

“How so?”

“As Wardeness of the East she’ll control every parcel of land Lord Arryn holds. And as your sister I’m certain her allegiance to the north will keep. With both just beneath her fingertips she’ll have an unstoppable army for whatever it is that comes up against her. Or, rather, whoever.”

His words were in yearning. Like narrating a daydream he coveted. One he had regularly. Jon didn’t doubt Lord Baelish thought of Sansa regularly. “You may be able to sway Lord Arryn whichever way you wish,” he said, “but your days of doing that to Sansa are over. She won’t let you control her and neither will I.”
Lord Baelish’s eyebrow jumped. “Is that what I am doing?” he asked slowly, head near tipping off his neck. “Controlling?”

“So it seems to me,” Jon affirmed. “When you leave with your army and your lord you will leave for good.”

“Sansa said something of the same to me.”

“Then perhaps you should listen. If you care for her as much as you claim to you’d permit her to choose the course of her life for herself.” He paused then, as an afterthought, “Including who she loves.”

“Since when is what she wants more important than what’s best for her?”

In a perfect world it would be.

In a perfect world it should be.

Who Sansa graced with her love should be more important than the whims and designs of any man, even more so than the man who degraded her to bastard status and hid her for himself as his niece. She should never have to lay her whole life in a bed of arrows purely because her seller got sufficient enough country or a pretty enough price for her.

True, Lord Baelish would not sell her (not again, learned his lesson). And, yes, he’d provide her with more lavish jewels and garments and trinkets than Jon ever could, and, yes, he’d worship her.

But this was not a perfect world. And worship was not love.

Scanning the man up and down, Jon said with finality, “Goodnight, Lord Baelish,” and continued on his way without so much as a check over his shoulder.

For the life of him, Jon couldn’t recall ever seeing the inside of the Lord’s Chamber. Arya’s quarters, sure. Robb’s, absolutely. Poked his head in on Bran and Rickon the short time they shared a bedchamber. He’d steered clear of Sansa’s, however, and he’d understood his place better than to dare go inside where Lady Stark slumbered, volunteered to keep watch the one time Robb filched something of his she’d confiscated as consequence of his restive behavior.

The door to the Lord’s Chamber looked like any other in the castle: strong wood, iron handle, splintered in places and scratched in others. Nothing exceptional. Though, why would it be? If it were at all irregular or unique it’d do a piss poor job of concealing the two most important people in Winterfell. If it were at all conspicuous they’d be too easy to find at their most private, their most vulnerable.

At the thought Jon was suddenly glad he insisted Sansa take the room over her childhood bedchambers; he didn’t know where or if any Bolton supporters still lingered in the wood, but if they did and if they retaliated in kind, then at least Sansa was hidden.

Brienne was the only indication of something beyond the plain door. A hand ready on her sword, she minded the door alone, the lone measure of security in the hall and effective at that, the door very nearly disappearing behind her hulking form. Jon didn’t know how long she’d been at her post, but she hadn’t yet cleaned up, hair eschew and her armor still wet with battle blood. Her cheeks were smeared and smudged as well, patched like bruises.

She turned her head as Jon broke into earshot and those supposed bruises further darkened. “Good evening, my lord,” she greeted him, stiffly bowing.
Jon returned the sentiment, boots clicking together on her right. That hand on her sword, he noticed, was shaking. The quietest tremble he’d ever seen, but a tremble nonetheless, prompting him to wonder yet again if today’s battle had been her first. If so, he was glad she’d come out on the right side, for he knew she was invaluable to any next effort he and Sansa embarked on.

He cleared his throat softly. “I just spoke with Lord Baelish,” he said.

And Brienne tensed beside him, lips parting. Stared at him like a stag caught in the sightline of an arrow. “My lord, I—”

“I want to thank you for not admitting him a visit with Sansa.” Smiling as best he could, Jon clapped Brienne on the shoulder. The ridges and bolts of the spaulders stabbed his bare hand. “I think she’s gone through enough today without him adding to her suffering.”

“I could not agree more, my lord,” Brienne admitted, stance relaxing and arms falling to her sides. “I haven’t heard much from her since she went in. She sent the handmaidens away a half hour ago.”

Jon nodded, though his heart ballooned at the thought of being alone with Sansa. Blessedly alone, cursedly alone, he didn’t know which. “Alright. Thank you, Lady Brienne. You may take your leave for the night, get some rest. I’ll stay with Sansa.”

Her brows pulled together. “But, my lord—”

“Go on,” Jon encouraged her. “I swear I will not leave her side all night. But in the morning I’d like to have an appointment with you. I want to assemble a protection Guard for Sansa and I’ll need to know who you’d like to hire for your detail.”

“Yes, my lord.” Stepping aside, Brienne glanced at the door and then at Jon, who smiled reassuringly, fake as it felt, fake as it was. She took a step back then another and another. “Goodnight, then.”

“Goodnight.”

Like the rest of the castle, Brienne and her armor faded from around Jon. Left him alone in a deserted hall. After a moment the only sound to his ear was his heart and its damnable thundering, its rocketing up his throat. He scuffed the bottom of his boot on the paver floor. Tapped his toe on the wall. Stared at the swirl of dust he mucked up. If Brienne were still there she’d roll her eyes at his haunting Sansa’s doorstep, tell him to buck up, coward, and likely shove him through the door herself.

Sansa could probably hear his dawdling, after all.

He didn’t know where this newfound fear of her came from – no, strike that. He did. The things that once brought him courage no longer did. He still felt her lips on his, her hand in his hair, that goddamn moan of hers that went straight elsewhere (wrong where), too hard and too tight, the way she pushed, the way she wanted, had to be soft, had to be gentle, didn’t she know that. He didn’t want to spook her or hurt her, or else that was it, over before it really began. Over before he could tell her, show her…everything.

Everything. He crammed lifetimes and whole worlds in so small a word.

Gulping, Jon raised his hand to the door and rapped roughly three times.

Accurate to Brienne’s intelligence, Sansa and Sansa alone answered his knock, the gods favoring him too much for one day. The room beyond Sansa was mercifully empty, every candle blazing and
the fireplace’s timber store healthily replenished and the bed turned down but otherwise void of handmaidens. Jon would’ve liked to see her in command, recommencing the role as lady of the house and shooing the ladies out her door. Down to assist the kitchen or elsewhere to tend to her guests, asserting she was more than capable of readying the room herself.

She’d changed into a woolen peignoir since he last saw her, curling a finger in the ribbons and the offending garment from earlier draped over the back of a chair in the far corner. Thin braids plaisted the sides of her head, twined from the temple and looped around to where it converged and flowed down her back in soft waves. She rolled a mint leaf between her teeth, but said not a word, the crackling fire filling the silence heavy between them.

Jon picked up the faint scent of roses and he wanted nothing more than to bury his nose in that sweet, sweet perfume for the rest of his natural days. “May I come in?” he asked cautiously.

Sansa nodded, hand dropping from the latch, and glided across the room. She didn’t stop until she hit wall, until the ankle-high spark screen raked over her toes and the door clicked behind Jon.

No more than a dark silhouette against the orange haze, she kept her back to him, fiddling with the icicles of frozen candle wax dripped from the mantle top, and the things Jon wanted most to say, the things that survived on the battlefield and the even more that bubbled up in his throat after, they stalled on his tongue. Settled their roots and built themselves a home.

They were such easy things to say, too. Or should have been. A laconic man, he’d never been extraordinarily good with words and worse so with his feelings – especially those of love and affection, things unknown but founded by another woman. Such things had to be pried out with maximum effort.

Of which Sansa deserved. Of which he’d do for her.

The brilliant blush of red in his black and white world, she was the spark in his heart. They were effortless. Shockingly. Mysteriously. And thus talking to her now should’ve been effortless, too.

So why did his tongue feel like it was tied up in knots, too big for his mouth? Why was his vision swirling and his body weightless, crawling heat? What hatched and flew in his stomach?

Jon cleared his throat. Divested the cloak from his shoulders and folded it over his arm, stuffing it in the indented trefoil window to his immediate right. He needed her to turn around. If she turned around then he’d see her and nothing but her and these fortifications restraining him would topple down and this wouldn’t be so scary. “Sansa—”

“Don’t.”

Barked like a pop in Jon’s ear, Sansa spun to face him, a hand flattened on her stomach, the buttons of her hanging by a thread. “I know what you’re going to say,” she croaked. “I do. And it’ll make me sick if you say it anyway.”

Jon cautioned a step closer to her, itching to comfort her, desperate to hold her, to sling any tear off her face and kiss a smile on there instead. “It isn’t what you think it is,” he said, wondered how in the heavens and how in the hells she grieved something he said before he had a chance to say something else. “But I do need to tell you something.”

Sansa sucked up the tears glistening like splintered glass in her eyes though her every breath was thick with them. Curled her hands into fists, dug her blunt nails into the dirty flesh of her palm. “And I need to tell you I’m sorry,” she managed. “I’m wicked, Jon. To the core, to my very being. Look at
what I did to you today. Look at the position I’ve set you in. Gods, you must be repulsed by me.”

“I’m not—”

“You should be. Men have abused me for so long that I’ve perverted one of the few who’s shown me any glimmer of kindness.”

Shaking her head, Jon whispered, “That isn’t true.”

“It is true!”

The little semblance of composure she corralled into place cracked, breaking a grand spider web that started at a wobbling chin and extended all the way to her shaking fingertips. Sansa scrubbed her wrists together, turned her head and nuzzled cheek to shoulder. The sound – the scratching, the clawing at the wool – was absolutely maddening. Jon’s hand twitched at his side.

“I kissed you,” Sansa choked out, gaze stuck on a spot to the right of her turnshoes. “I kissed you, Jon.”

“Aye, I was there,” Jon reminded her.

Sansa’s gaze twisted, right to him, vision narrowing, forehead creasing. “Then how can you stand being in the same room as me? How can you stand looking at me? I deserve your hate and I deserve your disgust.”

Jon swept up to her then, split her wrists before she rubbed them raw and collected her close. Her arms were pillared between them, giving neither the satisfaction of intimacy by touch they’d grown accustomed to, but perhaps Sansa didn’t want it, didn’t feel worthy of his comfort for she tried to pull away from Jon, hiccupping louder with every wrench and struggle. Her atonement, he realized, everlasting and enduring. He held tighter to her, squeezing her wrists in his palms.

“Sansa, you listen to me,” he commanded. “I am not disgusted with you. I do not hate you. Not in a millennia could I hate you.”

His sentiments only prompted her to stiffen, and Jon hoped she didn’t harden her heart to him too, though he knew to wishfully think such things was nothing but torment. “If you’re trying to spare my feelings,” she said none-too-gently, “don’t. I don’t need you to be nice to me.”

“That’s not what I’m doing—”

“Then you’re a fool. It’s safer to hate me,” Sansa stated, though her fingers clutched at the slight blooms of tunic leaking from Jon’s jerkin collar, and in that he found hope. Hope that perhaps she was merely on guard to protect herself from further infliction and not cruel for the sake of ignorance. If so, how long – and what – would it take for that wall to break apart, for her to trust him this night?

Jon traced the line of her arm all the way to her elbows; even when she could, Sansa dared not embrace him fully because she never again could have him fully. “What explanation do I have for my improper behavior?” she rambled on. “Rickon’s gone, and we don’t have a first thought of where Bran and Arya are. You’re all the family I have left and I poisoned it. I poisoned it.”

“You didn’t,” Jon assured.

“I did. I know these feelings originated from everything we’ve been through in two moons’ time, but I didn’t ask for them, Jon, I swear it. Please believe me. Or banish me.” Sansa flinched at the idea, but then nodded frantically, vehemently. “Yes, yes, exile me if it pleases you. I don’t deserve to
remain here. Only wicked women feel sinful love for their family, especially their brother an—"

“I am not Eddard Stark’s son.”

Sansa froze, clamped her mouth shut. And then she withered in place, drooped like a flower, brows pinching and a frown besetting her lips. Pitifully sad. Sympathetically sad. “Jon, legitimate or not, you’ll always be his son,” she attested. “I know I was cruel and heinous as a child and I always called you ‘half-brother’, and—”

“That’s not…”

Gods, how did he explain this? How did he explain something he didn’t fully understand? Something he didn’t wholly believe? Of all the people in the realm, he was the last heir of Rhaegar Targaryen? He had a valid claim to the Iron Throne? Every time the thoughts nudged back to the surface of his mind they presented themselves more and more absurd. Like one of those silly songs Old Nan used to sing to the children in the cradle.

Or was it mad enough to be true? Still a bastard and still a pawn but a Targaryen one now, maybe the Red Priestess was right; maybe he was the prince that was promised.

Jon closed his eyes. Oh, how low he’d sunk, considering that woman’s queer charlatan prophecies.

He heard Sansa murmur his name, heard the worry laced through it. She needed to know this. He needed her to know this. He needed someone he loved and someone he trusted to know, if only to relieve him of this torture. To share in it. And Sansa was brilliant in her own capacities. She’d validate or invalidate his suspicions, have questions he’d never have thought of, questions she could ask Lord Reed if Jon didn’t have the courage to.

Taking a deep breath, Jon said calmly, “I’m not Eddard Stark’s biological son.”

Sansa cocked her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“Where I come from, who my parents are, that’s what Lord Reed’s wanted to discuss with me since he arrived,” Jon divulged. “The reason…Lord Eddard never told me the truth about who my mother was, why he constantly deflected my questions, it was because your aunt, Lyanna, is my mother.”

“Jon—”

“And Rhaegar Targaryen is my father.”

Her hands dropped from his chest.

How Sansa would receive the news, Jon had no way of knowing. How could he calculate someone else’s reaction to something this significant, this monumental, when he himself hadn’t yet adjusted to it? His knee-jerk reaction had been to lash out, to allow a film of anger and interlaced disbelief to curtain how the news struck him. His shock, his distress, those he’d covered up. Not cleverly, of course; it was plain for anyone to see his pretense of one emotion for another hid him from further hurt.

But Sansa… Women in particular were masters at masquerading their thoughts and emotions, tutored to at such an early age, enigmas no man was ever able to riddle out if they were taught especially well. But Jon had hoped their intimate confidence in each other enabled Sansa to speak freely, to feel freely. She merely blinked at him, as though he were a puzzle she wanted to configure before raising her tongue, and Jon came to fear her silence more than any outburst.
What did she think in that heads of hers? In her mind’s eye, did he wear a new skin of indigo eyes and silver curls? Was he grotesque to her now? Did she feel betrayed as he did? And if so, betrayed by her father for reserving the secret or betrayed by Jon for not being who she knew him to be? If that be the case he’d fight her tooth and nail, make her see his compounded lineage did not renege who he was.

He was still Jon, 998th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, King Crow, the White Wolf. Snow, Stark, Targaryen, it mattered little to him because it wouldn’t change him. He’d always be Jon.

(Her Jon, if she wanted.)

(Please want, he begged of her.)

Jon put her small and delicate and good hands to his heart, every beat reminding her of that. “Sansa, please say something,” he implored. “I need you.”

She shook her head, stared long at the weirwood tapestry over the bedhead, dazed in the eye and perhaps not seeing it. Her lips, those precious and lovely and entrancing lips, slowly unrolled from being so tightly compressed. Jon saw them perfectly from this vantage and he watched the white wash away, watched them swell bright red like in the seconds after their kiss.

(That kiss. Gods be good, don’t let it ruin us, he prayed. He loved her too much.)

Jon said her name again, trepid still, and Sansa snapped forth, finally pushing away from him and dragging a hand through her waves. “Do you believe him?” she asked, misgiving edging her voice.

“I don’t know,” he said sincerely. Hours later and he still hadn’t digested the full scope of his feelings on the matter, but he instituted an embargo on further exploration until he knew Sansa’s reply.

He was close enough to curl his fingers around her elbow and tug her back to him. He didn’t dare, however, and Sansa didn’t grant him the chance, perching on one of the three-legged stools breasting the fireplace. Glancing at the other stool to the right of the hearth, Jon thought to retrieve it, to draw lines in the soot and set it up an appropriate distance from her, keen not to crowd her or make her uncomfortable.

While some bits of her were familiar to him again, he couldn’t account for the rest. He’d keep his distance until she invited him otherwise.

“I confess, I thought Lord Reed was lying at first,” he said, “but you should have heard him speak, Sansa. Whether he expects me to believe him or not, I’m not sure, but he believes everything he’s said. He believes Lyanna and Rhaegar ran away together not because he stole her but because they loved one another.”

“She was betrothed to a stag,” Sansa argued. “Robert Baratheon might not have been our sovereign king then, but he was a man of influence and no matter which direction his wrath resulted he was soon to be a lord of somewhere. Why risk her position?”

“He believes Lyanna despised Robert so much that she’d rather have been Rhaegar’s secret wife than Robert’s queen.”

Sansa shook her head and said, “He’s not of sound mind.”

“Didn’t you ever wonder about the stories we were told? Or question them?” Longclaw thumped against Jon’s leg as he shuffled, toddling on whether to join her on the other stool or respectfully
keep his distance. Uncertain, he carefully unshackled the belt from his hip, the scabbard mud-stained, the steel inside the sleeve rigid with dried blood. “Because I did. Lyanna’s abduction never made sense to me. The reverent way Uncle Benjen and others spoke of her, the stories they told, I always pictured her as a warrior.”

“Like Arya.”

He nodded. “Can you imagine anyone stealing Arya? I can’t. Not without a proper fight. If they were as alike as everyone says, how did anyone steal Lyanna? How did she let anyone steal her?” he questioned, wringing the belt strap around his fist. “And how did they avoid detection for nine whole months? Or possibly longer?”

Sansa looked up at him, absentmindedly rubbing her arms. “You think someone knew where they were? What they were doing? You think they had council?”

“It’s the logical explanation. One of the Targaryens, maybe,” Jon theorized. “Secrets don’t stay secret for long.”

“No, they don’t.” Sansa released a shuddering breath, her entire body trembling with it. Her eyes closed and her lips parted. “We need to write the Citadel.”

“Assuming they have any record of me. Lord Eddard might’ve written to them the same lie he told all of us.”

Another undeniable fact of this equation. Who knew how deeply this omission went. Assuming Lyanna Stark had midwives and Jon a wet nurse, where were they in their lives? Were they still alive, even, or sacrificed for the greater good of the conspiracy? What about Maester Luwin; was he privy to Jon’s true nature? Were Reed’s own children given the extra detail when their father spoke of the Tower of Joy, and if so, was that why they obeyed their father’s mission in looking after the youngest Stark children?

So many questions. So many answers Jon suspected he’d never receive.

“Your friend, the one who went to Oldtown,” Sansa spoke up, “the one with the baby…”

“Sam.”

“Sam,” she repeated. “Would you be more comfortable writing to him about this? It is a delicate matter and one you should only entrust to someone who can be discreet. If he explored the Citadel’s library and found evidence to support Lord Reed’s claim, I’d be more inclined to believe him. Because…” Sansa sighed. “I thank Lord Reed for the support he’s given us and for riding with you today, but you’ve seen him. He’s as likely to ramble on about some ale-fueled fever dream as he is to tell you the truth. He’s a drunkard, Jon.”

“But he was there,” Jon exclaimed.

_He was there, he was there, he was there_, over and over the broken litany needed to induce belief. He thought it necessary for himself, but not for Sansa. Not for Sansa, who he expected would unquestioningly believe Lord Reed’s tale as it had all the makings of budding from her beloved songs and fairytales. She was a patriot of their tragic heroes and unpredictable revelations, after all, and… A secret love affair and a secret child, the knight using all his magic to protect the one he loved, a prince that was truly a bastard and a bastard that was truly a prince – were these not the common columns of her songs and fairytales?

Sansa didn’t respond. Fruitlessly, he felt, Jon tried again. “He was there, Sansa. The very fact that he
kept Lord Eddard’s secret for as long as he did tells me he’s an honorable man. I don’t believe he means to trick us.”

“There’s no honor in tricks,” she said.

“No,” Jon concurred, turning his back on her, “there’s not.”

Behind him Sansa mumbled, quiet under her breath but every time the same thing: he’s lying, it’s not true. *He’s lying, it’s not true. He’s lying, it’s not true.*

Jon leaned Longclaw against the footboard, careful it didn’t tip off the pommel and clatter to the floor. When it’d steadied he lifted his hand to the rich pelt blanketing the end of the bed, running his hand over the coarse hairs, coarse like bristles. A rare gift from House Mormont, brown in color and massive enough to coat the entire mattress when spread out, its oily texture surprised Jon, felt like Ghost when he’d forgotten to bathe him for many moons. Escaping his hand underneath the trifolded pelt, he found the underfur to be more pleasant, warmer.

A glance over his shoulder saw Sansa hunched forward on the stool. The hot springs simmering beneath their feet and running through the granite walls couldn’t quell this dreadful cold, and angled half out of the fire’s reach as she was, she shivered. And her fervent mumblings…

Why didn’t she believe him? Why did she so readily dismiss Lord Reed’s claims? He may still question it, but questioning was not dismissing, and annoyance flared in his chest. Puffed its smoke up from his belly and filtered it through the rest of him. Seven hells, why did she assume he and Lord Reed were lying, or rather, that he was gullible enough to be lied to? She couldn’t possibly think he learned nothing in his life, that he survived this far by taking everything everyone told him at face value.

Her voice, those six words, they slit him open in a dozen places. Embedded under his skin. Swam deeper and deeper while the smoke leaked out.

*He’s lying it’s not true.*

Jon bunched his hand in the bear pelt.

*He’s lying, it's not true.*

He whipped around and cried aloud, “Why not?”

“Because she’ll take you away if it is!” Sansa fired back.

As swiftly as it ignited, Jon’s fight dissipated. It drained from his bones and dragged him part to the ground, exhausting and cumbersome and of course. Of course, he thought. He could shake himself for his stupidity. Or shake the stupidity from him, a hard wallop to the side of the head.

From the moment Sansa slid from her mount and into his arms their reunion had been a balance of risks, teetering on a double-edged sword wherein either end meant separation: if they failed at their endeavor, off to the guillotine for one or both of them; if they succeeded their resurrected house and line would attract many agreeable suitors and one would be displaced to a new kingdom, likely to never be seen again.

Forfeiting each other was probable, Jon knew. But in his mind they could choose when or never.

He stole the pelt from its featherbed. “Who?” he asked, though he knew.
“The queen in Essos. The Mother of Dragons,” Sansa answered hesitantly, almost nervously. “I remember when Father was Hand of the King he refused to sanction her assassination before her son and husband crossed the Narrow Sea for her inheritance. Now the gossip is she brings the Dothraki and Unsullied and her dragons, and the talk only grows in fervor. They call her the last Targaryen.” She fiddled with one of her braids, tamped escaped whorls and puffs curling up from her temple. “But if Lord Reed’s words are true then she’s not anymore and she never was. She’ll find out about you and when she does, when she goes to King’s Landing for the Iron Throne she’ll want you to mobilize the North behind her. And you’ll leave.”

“Sansa.”

The pelt trailing behind him as long as a gown’s train, Jon crossed the room to her side. He wrapped her in the fur twice over, practically swaddled her for how big it was, and one of her hands peeked out to grasp the edges, pining it to her neck like the paneled choker Melisandre wore at all hours of the day. His fingertips glided lambently over hers.

He retrieved the second stool from the fireside and the thing sang a horrific tune as it scraped across the flagstone. A mere few inches taller than a foot stool, a gnarly groove sliced Jon’s finger, but it did itself properly, slapping down with a reverberate thwack.

Wobbling on its edge, buffering Sansa’s knees between his splayed ones, Jon hooked Sansa’s chin and tipped her face up to look him in the eye. If she looked him in the eye she’d hear him. Believe him. “That’s what consumes you from this news?” he asked incredulously. “You’re not terrorized by my presence endangering you or this Targaryen blood driving me mad, but that I’ll leave you?”

“It’s not so silly a thought!”

Jon couldn’t help a chuckle. “Aye, it’s not, but… Sweetling, that will never happen.”

Twin tears leaked from Sansa’s eyes, slinging zigzags on her cheek as she shook her head. “Maybe not today,” she whimpered. “Maybe not tomorrow. But someday.”

How did he deny that rationality? He hadn’t been in the library at the time, came in on its heels to ask for a private audience with Maester Aemon, but Sam referenced an exchanged he shared with the elderly man after reading aloud a scroll about Daenerys Targaryen’s conquers. “A Targaryen alone in the world is a terrible thing,” he supposedly said, although Jon wasn’t the first to dispute his great-great uncle’s wisdom.

Jon hadn’t labored over it too hard, entranced instead by his forthcoming decisions and Maester Aemon’s advice to kill the boy and let the man live, but he thought of it now, felt compelled to correct anyone alone in the world was a terrible thing.

Sansa claimed in more than one whisper between their bed pallets that he’d saved her, but no. No. She had saved him, and Jon feared he’d never be able to adequately express his gratitude to her for pulling him from the dark he considered returning to if it meant he didn’t have to be here anymore.

Getting Sansa back, it was the sweetest magic this dreary world had to offer.

If – when; he had to be realistic – Queen Daenerys overheard the rumors about him and she requested he migrate south to her land of Dothraki and dragons, Jon didn’t know if he’d feel honor-bound to go or honor-bound to stay.

He prayed for one way more than the other.

Then again, if he upset her course would she want anything to do with him at all?
Perhaps he should pray for that result instead.

Jon gazed into Sansa’s eyes, a hand on her cheek and flicking away the tears. He couldn’t kiss a smile on her lips, not yet and maybe not at all depending on her wishes, but then, before his entrenched morals got the better of him and before her skin burned his hand as bitingly as the cold, he ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

Those lips which parted under his touch. “I’d still choose you,” he declared.

Sucking in a sharp breath, Sansa swayed forward and touched her forehead to his, squeezing out more tears. Jon cradled the back of her neck, tangled his fingers in her hair, and she pet his thickening beard, days and weeks and months since his last shear. He briefly wondered how she preferred her men manicured, if she minded the burn from a well-groomed scruff or if she liked the smooth of a clean shave. Not that it appeared to bother her either way at the present moment.

“And I choose you,” she breathed, calling back his thoughts, cylindering them to her. “But you can’t defy your queen.”

“I’ll defy anyone who means to separate us. I will not be gone from you again,” Jon said indignantly. And then he paused, scooting just an inch closer. “Besides,” he whispered conspiratorially, “she is not my queen. You are.”

“How’s that?”

“As you said, Rickon’s gone and we don’t know where north or south of the Wall Bran is, which designates you heir apparent,” he explained. “You’re the Lady of Winterfell and Wardeness of the North. Command I stay, Sansa, and I will stay and put you first. I don’t want anything to do with King’s Landing or its politics. Queen Daenerys can have it. We’ll rebuild Winterfell to the way we remember it and we’ll start a new pack. Our pack. You and me, Sansa, alive and well and safe here in the North.”

*What is honor compared to the love of a woman,* Maester Aemon also considered.

The spell broke on contact. Sorrow quilted every charred remainder of Sansa’s being, from the slow stream of her hands down his chest to her hollowing eyes darting rapidly as they searched his. Nails sinking into the leather, she pushed apart from Jon, slipping right through his fingers. “It’s a pretty picture,” she mused, “but you shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Like what?” Jon asked, knowing better but curiosity getting the likelihood of him.

“Things you don’t mean,” Sansa said. “Because you can’t possibly mean them.”

“And if I do?”

She bowed her head. Splayed his hand out on her knees and tapped her finger to each of his, all while Jon watched her, taking in every meticulous detail of her face. She didn’t avert her eyes from the memory of her transgression, or from the shame of it, surely, because whatever indiscretion she tagged to herself, it was not the sum of her. Of them. She was more than that and they were too.

Or, at least, Jon prayed to any god around to listen that she realized such a thing. If not, the sentiments he hoarded in his chest since the battle and forthwith fell on deaf and dead ears and what would be the point of them then? He wanted a fighting chance to prove else before atonement belittled her and barred her from him and awkward formality took up its post.

Elbows drilling into his thighs, Jon ripped his hand from beneath hers and then tore through his curls.
Courage pushed past the bars caging his lips. “I feared the battlefield,” it confessed, emblazoned by Sansa glancing at him. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to lose faith in me, but every battle since the first has sowed in me the horror of thinking the next will be my last. Dying was all I thought of for days, even while you guided the negotiations to flank men around me. I still suspected we’d lose after the Knights of the Vale joined us and when you rode away into the trees I knew I’d never see you again. I had to stare at you as long as I could.

“Then Tormund and I rode to meet Ramsay Bolton between the armies and I looked into the face of your monster and…” Jon took a breath. “I remembered everything you said to me our last night in Mole Town, the one we spent drinking with the others. I remembered you said you loved me and how I had to come back or you’d be lost if I didn’t. Knowing what’d happen to you if I didn’t come back scared me more than dying did.”

And then he smiled. Dared to reach out. Dared to brush a lock of Sansa’s hair behind her ear. How could he not? She shone beautifully in the firelight. “This thing we’re feeling, it scares me too,” he said. “And I know it puts us in position for the worst sort of pain, but I choose you, Sansa.

“I choose you because the things we most fear losing are the things we love most in this world. I choose you because you give me the courage I need. I choose you because you survived everything it took to bring you here and while those things might’ve broken some of you they did not break all of you. That resilience taught you how to fight. I choose you because you accepted my alliance with the free folk and even befriended them without thought to how others looked at you.

“I choose you because your voice is the sweetest song I’ve heard in years and years of white noise. I choose you because I want to kiss you every day to my last. I choose you because I think I’d very much like to marry you.”

There. His heart laid at her feet, purged of all the mighty and sometimes miserable things.

The last bit had surprised him as much as it surprised her, but the moment it trailed off he found, yes, it was what he wanted. Yes, he wanted to wake up every morning and see her first and next and last. Yes, he wanted a snow-drizzled ceremony at the heart tree and a crown of jewels on her finger and his bridal cloak on her shoulders. Yes, he wanted to father her young, to fill the world with fire-haired Targaryens and purple-eyed Starks now that such an option was viable to him. Yes, he wanted to do all this at her side or not at all.

What made for a more perfect life than that vision?

If Sansa would have him, that was.

She stared at Jon, unmoving and unblinking, appearing in all the clear signs of shock. Personally asking a lady for her hand in marriage was uncommon and unorthodox in their world, he supposed. Some would call it an extinct practice, such things always a careful brokering between the man and her father like she were the stock negotiated in a trades deal, her feelings on the matter having little to no measure on its outcome. But it felt right this way, to Jon, giving Sansa decisive power of her future and her future family, the power to say no or yes or whatever in between without repercussion or reprisal.

Without a reaction to lead him, her inner contemplations were a mystery to Jon. The suspense was uncomfortable, her silence even more unnerving, and a sudden insecurity gnawed at his stomach which a moment ago was steel and at his heart which was open. “Not because anyone’s telling you to or for a political alliance,” he hurriedly clarified, “but because you love me. Because you want to.”
To move her along, to flinch some sort of response in her or just a morsel or a twitch, he cupped her hands in his, drew them to his lips and tenderly kissed each of her fingers. Sansa blinked several times, thrust back to the present and to him, thank the gods. “I think we can be happy, Sansa, but if you don’t want this or me we’ll forget I said anything.”

“I want it.” Sansa rushed out in a whisper. Sniffling, she twined her fingers between his and squeezed. Jon squeezed back, a quick smile crinkling his face. “I want you, and I feel like it’s taken me so long to figure that out. I know we only found each other two moons ago, but seeing you again, what I’ve been feeling…”

“I know,” Jon said, scooting as close to her as his knees and hers allowed, kissing her forehead and her cheek and everywhere else, the same as before.

Sansa locked her arms around his neck as he peppered her face, the pelt shrugging off her shoulders and she bringing it with, wrapping him up in it too. “I knew it was love,” she went on, “but it felt wrong. Different than before. Not pure or innocent or familial. And then you kissed me and I knew it was on accident and you didn’t mean it, but that’s when it made sense.”

“What made sense, sweetling?”

“Why I enjoy it when you look at me and why I was jealous every time Lady Melisandre spoke to you and why I wanted to make you proud of me. I finally identified what I was feeling. I want to kiss you and touch you and be with you and only you. I want my life bonded to yours, Jon.”

Her voice hitched on his name, not quite a croak but not at all stable either. And Jon laughed, just a little, mirth and incandescence and unimaginable jubilance coloring that laugh and his cheeks and his eyes. How happy she could make him with the gravity of eight words. That vision burst to spectacular light right before his eyes; he saw her coming down the aisle in her wedding gown and glowing the next morning and every morning after, saw them amidst a snowball fight with the sons and daughters he fathered. Saw an utterly content life.

At one time, as a boy young and clueless and hiding his anger, he’d been able to walk away from her, fine with never seeing her again for as long as he lived, but now, as a man older and wiser and slowly putting the pieces of himself back together, he couldn’t imagine living in a world where she wasn’t. And for his sanity’s sake he hoped he never had to find out what that world looked like.

Jon hauled her closer, wanted her in his lap and her chest pressed to his, but there was no rush tonight or through to tomorrow. So much was to come. “You do?” he asked breathlessly, and Sansa nodded, arching straighter as his arms escaped around her waist. “Then may I kiss you again?”

“Yes,” Sansa answered, and then Jon’s lips were on hers, swallowing her breath whole.

He nipped playfully at her lips at first, kissed the smile that cracked her face open and she beamed even bigger, cherry-cheeked and aflame. Then he sucked on her bottom lip, snagged it between his teeth and tugged, and she fisted a hand in his curls, squeaking out a soft moan, and a hot wire spooled in Jon’s stomach.

Sansa might not have been practiced (the receiver of a scant few kisses, each deplorable and each Jon was determined to evaporate from her memory), but, Gods, was she eager. Gods, was she passionate. Jon greedily devoured everything she gave, from how she sank against him, into the kiss and into his embrace, to how the pelt’s hairs tickled the nape of his neck as she tried to bring him closer to her, closer still, never close enough. He delighted in the wet slide of their mouths and the reedy gasps between each slant, intoxicating, glorious, blasphemous were her lips because he realized he would’ve forsaken any honor for them if he’d known what awaited him.
Caved in the fur’s heat like a funnel whipping them furiously and feverishly, Jon swiped his tongue along the seam of Sansa’s lips and she met his tongue instantly, emboldened by her renewed bravado from earlier in the tent. Gods, he wanted her in his lap, wanted her legs around his waist and her hips meeting his and she hiked up inches taller than he so she towered him and he had to crane his neck deliciously to meet her lips. He wanted her hands under his tunic and his under her dress, and he’d open his eyes to watch as she shuddered against him, watch her eyes pinch as his fingers plunged into her smallclothes and touched her in every way she didn’t know were pleasure.

He wanted to erase every way a man wronged her or abused her or tortured her. Those memories may have made her stronger, but love did the same and she was made invincible by his love for her.

Just to see how far she’d allow his hands to adventure, he trailed the long length of her spine. Fingers dipped to her lower back, to the first curve of her bottom, and Sansa broke the kiss, eyes screwed shut and panting on his lips.

Pushing lightly on his shoulders, she sat back and Jon swayed forward, chasing her lips. The surge rocked the stool underneath him, threw him off balance and tipped the stool precariously onto one leg. The ground rushed up to meet Jon and he flailed, arms pinwheeling, teetering and nearly falling on top of Sansa. She erupted, throwing her head back and laughing, just managing to catch Jon like a domino cratering into another as he grabbed the stool on either side of her.

Every circuit in Jon’s body shorted, fire sparking them throughout, his heart leaping into his throat and his breath wild in his chest. After a few moments, as he caught his breath and the world narrowed its clarity again, a hot flush spun up his neck and inflamed his ears. Mortified, he slugged in Sansa’s embrace, hid his face in the crook of her neck and groaned.

Or, whined, more like.

“That went better in my head,” he noted, pelt hairs sticking to his lips.

Sansa snorted rather undignified-like, her fingers descending from their soothing card through his hair to play along his jaw. She picked up his head, forced him to meet her smirk pulling crooked at the edges of her mouth. But without saying a word she kissed him quick, one two three pecks, as giddy as the echo of the girl she used to be. It was entrancing. “I think it went pretty well,” she said.

She didn’t bother to wait for his response before kissing him again, as seemingly addicted to him as he was to her. He couldn’t stop touching her, hands leaving the stool to dance on her waist, wouldn’t stop touching her for as long as she let him to. They kissed languidly, lovingly, meanderingly, nowhere to go and nothing to do but explore each other and the greener side of this boundary line they toed for long enough. She scorched every bit of skin she touched, down the sharp line of his jaw and past his small ears to pinch the hair at the back of his neck.

Gods, he couldn’t imagine leaving her. Not ever.

Humming, a pleased smile decorating her face, Sansa drew back and turned her body around, knocking her knees into Jon’s and angling to face the fire. The pelt slipped across Jon’s back as she twisted; suddenly cold, he pivoted around on his stool as well, situating side by side so that they shared the fur.

He stared at her while she stared at the sputtering flames. She bit down on a smile, something apparently amusing about her thoughts. “What are you thinking about?” he wondered.

“I’ve never kissed a man I loved before,” she stated matter-of-factly, reaching over for his hand and laying it on her knee. Her fingers walked across the many lines of his palm. Life line, fate line, head
line, heart line, he remembered a traveling grifter once reading him. “It’s strange to do so.”

“What about Joffrey?”

“That wasn’t love,” she contradicted, tracing his long but broken life line, then added, “A stupid girl only thought it was.”

“You weren’t stupid. You were young,” Jon argued. Yes, he thought her dressmaking and etiquette frivolous and her infatuation with the golden Lannister whelp silly, but no sillier than any crush any other girl had in Winterfell. The fact that anyone lambasted or harangued her for acting her age irked him. “There’s a difference.”

Sansa pinned him with a look, saw right through him and to his very last thoughts. “You never once thought my fancies were stupid?”

“Perhaps once or twice. But I was young too. And none of that matters now. I love you, Sansa,” he said, and there was no measure of times he’d tell her if her eyes alighted like that every time. He’d tell her every day, every chance, as much as humanly and physically possible.

“Truly?”

Jon chuckled. “Is that so unbelievable?”

She shook her head, sprinkled her fingers on his jaw. Nudging her lips against his, she put her love down softly, repeated it again and again, every “I love you” caught on a kiss. “Even though it doesn’t make sense,” she said. “Even though it makes sense least of all—”

“It doesn’t have to make sense.”

“Even if it isn’t the smartest match—”

“I don’t care if it’s not a smart match. I want you.”

“And I want you. But…” A notch embedded in her forehead and though he’d seen it a dozen times – of hundreds more, he knew – Jon never realized how endearing it was, the way her brows pulled to the recesses of her thoughts and that little window opened to them. She bowed her head, talking to her hands, and he ducked to kiss that notch, that window. “What if I can’t give you children, Jon? What if Ramsay ruined me and I can’t..?”

He shook his head, didn’t want Sansa to torment herself over that divisive impossibility any more than he wanted to consider it. Her braids were mussed, unraveling from their careful threads and drooping on either side of her head from being entangled and petted and bunched, and he brushed a lock back behind her ear. “If the gods bless us with children then we will have children.”

“You need heirs, Jon—”

“To what?” he huffed. “We don’t know for certain if Lord Reed is telling the truth, and even if he is, what evidence is there to show Rhaegar and Lyanna were ever husband and wife? I’d still be a bastard, Targaryen or not. I’m nothing—”

“You’ve never been nothing.”

“If I’m ever responsible for providing the realm with heirs we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. It’s more important that I help you carry on the Stark line. That we carry it on.”
Sansa sighed. “Regardless,” she said, looking at him through her eyelashes, “I do need to think about your proposal of marriage. For your sake and for mine.”

“Take all the time you need,” Jon advised her.

“Thank you. I suppose the lords aren’t expecting an announcement of any kind, are they?” she said, mostly to herself, convincing herself of the dial in front of her barren of shadows. “We have quite a bit to attend to.”

Yes. Once the last of the dead were burned to ensure none of them metamorphosed into wights, Rickon and Davos were next on the pyres, fetes meant for the princes they were. Funerals, feasts, tributes, executions, and planning Winterfell’s restoration would follow swiftly after.

It was almost too much to comprehend, too daunting on their very eve. Jon suspected tonight would be the last and only they’d enjoy alone and uninterrupted.

Looping an arm through his and nestling up to him, Sansa laid her head on Jon’s shoulder, sighed, “What do we do with the castle and Ramsay’s hounds and…him?”

She rolled out the last word disdainfully, foul on her tongue and greatly amusing Jon’s ear. “Bolton’s locked in the dungeons, sequestered in the Iron Maiden,” he reported. “Yara Greyjoy severed his tongue as retribution for his crimes against Theon, but I told her to keep him alive. His death is yours to decide.”

“What do you suggest?”

“The Bolton house sigil is the flayed man,” he considered. “Honor his heritage. If he’s arrogant enough to believe even his death will be popularly attended, we can burn him at first light with as little fanfare as we can manage.”

Sansa closed her eyes, exhaled deeply, and Jon tried to picture the weight of Ramsay curbing off of her. Her tormenter, this infernal and wretched and brutal person who dragged her down to hell and threw away the key with her still trapped inside, was finally getting his comeuppance. He was finally getting what he deserved. Jon tried to imagine what Sansa felt like, knowing that after tomorrow Ramsay would be gone from this world and the constant threat of him gone too. His menace would be allayed and Sansa no longer haunted by his impending visits to her bedchamber or the feeling of him looming over her shoulder, waiting to pounce like a predator on prey.

After tomorrow Ramsay Bolton was a ghost she’d vanquish absolutely and irreversibly.

Jon hadn’t felt alleviated when he hanged Alliser Thorne or Olly or the other mutineers who each plunged a blade through him, but he was glad for Sansa. She could at last breathe. Rest. Heal.

“That pleases me, but let him stay down there a day or two longer,” she said. Easing to her feet, her half of the fur falling to the floor, she held her hand out to Jon, twinkling her fingers in beckoning. “In the meantime, come with me. Because you, my love, are in desperate need of a bath.”
locking up everyone who ever laid a finger on me

Chapter Summary

Maybe she had to survive everything she went through. Maybe she had to survive Father’s death and Joffrey’s cruelty and Tyrion as her husband and fleeing with Petyr and suffering Ramsay’s brutality. Maybe Jon did too; maybe he had to survive his Night’s Watch oath and his trek north of the Wall and opposing his brothers and his first love’s death and dying himself.

Maybe all of that meant this. Sansa wasn’t a fatalist – she lost sight of any power propelling her a certain way a long time ago – but she thought maybe she and Jon were always meant for here, for this moment. For mobilizing the North and taking back the home that was pillaged from them. For finding each other and loving each other.

Maybe here was always the light at the end of the pitch-black tunnels they had to survive to get to.

Chapter Notes

Admittedly, this isn't my strongest chapter.

Sansa didn’t know how long she and Jon slept, only that they slept peacefully, not a single monster to fear creeping into her solar or a single nightmare bringing them anyway, the first restful night in many, many months.

The fire toasted down to sizzling coals before they finished talking, legs crossed and sitting in front of each other amongst a mountain of furs and fleece, finally retired when the moon was as high in the sky as it could arch. Jon curved his front around Sansa’s back, his breath even and warm on her neck, and she knotted her fingers through his, tucked his hand underneath her chin and slept. Dreamed warmly for the first time in she didn’t remember how long.

The first bars of morning light filtered into the room far too quickly, far too early. Sansa grimaced, shuttered her eyes behind her hands, and shifted onto her other side, to face Jon. Her night rail ensnared her legs, constricting her, and she reached a hand under the covers to free them, hitching the gown a little on her thighs to edge a knee between Jon’s. He hummed light in his throat, dug under her hip and enclosed her to his chest, and she burrowed further against him.

Nuzzling, she let out a content breath. “You should leave before someone barges in and sees us,” she said, slow and drowsy.

“Let them see,” Jon retorted.

Sansa smiled. “Yes, and never mind how that gossip will reach every ear in Winterfell before we’ve made it downstairs for breakfast. As you said, secrets don’t stay secret for long.”
She peeked her eyes open, blinking the bleariness away, feeling a speck of crust in one corner. The morning light, ethereal on clear days, downright angelic when it beamed down on the snow like the inches they watched pile up on the window sills last night, streamed across his face, highlighting the scar slashed over his left eye. She couldn’t help but gaze at him and muse on how beautiful he was in this light, in many lights, the kind of splendor poets wrote their sonnets about. Songs would be written about him after yesterday, whether he wanted to scoff at it or not.

Perhaps she’d make an appearance in one or two of them.

How would they write about this moment, she wondered: the Daughter of Winterfell ruffling her noble sensibilities by sharing a bed with A Son of the Dragon, a once half-brother and now maybe-cousin? How would this moment of discovery be transcribed in history? Or every one of its ripples in the waters?

Admittedly, she still wasn’t one hundred percent certain she believed Lord Reed, no matter how many hours she and Jon spent discussing its possibility, no matter how late into the night they reconsidered their childhood stories. A small part of her denied it indomitably, but the rest of her – and she didn’t know whether or not this was the her that just wanted Jon without compunction – believed it without thought.

But the thought haunting her the most was this: her world as she knew it wouldn’t exist if Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark hadn’t run away together.

A fatalist epiphany, yes, but one she couldn’t shake.

Black chest hair curled into view from beneath Jon’s smoke gray nightshirt, and Sansa hooked a finger in the ruffled collar, grazing the crimps she’d never before been intrigued by but now could not stop looking at. She wondered how expansive the hair was, if a sprinkle or abundant like his long locks and thickening beard. If it was as fecund between his legs. And which was longer: the hair or his cock.

Sansa blushed at the thought.

“Are you awake?” she whispered.

“ Barely,” Jon exhaled. He melted further into the bedding then, his arm loosening around her waist but the rest of his body encouraging her onto her back. Though panic should’ve seized her, Sansa went willingly, smirking to herself when seconds later she had an armful of him, his head cushioned on her breast and hair tickling her chin. “Can we stay here a little while longer?” he asked, and her old sensibilities, her shrewd decorum, they flew out the window and into the whirlwind of snow powdering the land.

Her handmaidens would beg for forgiveness rather than ask for permission, etiquette asserting that a lady – especially the Lady of the House – not wilt the day away in her bed unless afflicted with infirmity. If Jon had not gone by then, if they witnessed so intimate a scene…

Being the subject of castle gossip would be the least of their problems.

Yet. The sight before her, Jon rising and falling with her every breath, the feel of his weight partially atop her, was worth every gold coin the Lannisters would pay their spies for more information. Cersei Lannister would relish in this scene, Sansa knew, to see the little dove in bed with her crow brother, not as good as she portrayed herself to be, instead the same as the lioness. Maybe she learned more during her residency in King’s Landing than she first thought.
The thought, even if founded, made Sansa sick to her stomach. She expected touch to be tainted for her, too thoroughly traumatized by Joffrey whose lessons ordered his men to strike her for him, by Littlefinger who used chivalry to purchase a kiss and everything else he wanted from her, and by Ramsay who took what he wanted worse than the other two combined. But Jon was different. Jon was different from everyone. If Sansa said yes to his proposal (and Gods knew she wanted to say yes, wedding dress designs catching her in sleep) their announcement would have to be immaculately planned.

And emotionally and mentally prepared for. Doubtless they’d cull Lannister comparisons well up to the day.

But if Jon was indeed a Targaryen… Sister-wives weren’t unheard of. Outlawed and frowned upon by narrow people, yes, but practiced.

For a moment Sansa debated whether it was better to be compared to a Lannister or a Targaryen.

“What are you mulling over up there?” Jon piped up, unearthing his arm from the fur’s swelter and stretching it out to his left.

“You,” Sansa answered, choosing not to elaborate. The day was young still; the moment he walked out of her solar he’d have enough worrying things to fill his plate without her being the one to start the plate’s collection. Why burden him before it was absolutely necessary?

She felt him smile through her night rail’s thin cotton, heard his muffled, “Good things, I hope.”


Lifting her head, Sansa scooped her hair over one shoulder, thought Gods only knew what it looked like, unable to see for herself with her hand mirror out of reach on the dressing table across the room. Braids undone and brushed through with her fingers just before bed, it probably puffed up in the night, a certifiable and unladylike rat’s nest. She combed it out self-consciously. “What’s on your agenda today?” she asked Jon. “When do you retrieve the remaining Free Folk?”

“Tormund’s likely left by now,” he responded. “I told him to take a small party of the Mormont soldiers in case there’s any opposition hiding in the woods.”

Sansa frowned. “Do you have reason to suspect Bolton soldiers escaped the battlefield?”

“It’s a precaution, Sansa, that’s all,” Jon said, running a hand up and down her right side, meant to soothe her and doing its job. She closed her eyes, uninterested in leaving their nest either, too comfortable to move, bones dissolving and sand filling in. “We ran aground on fragile land when we beat Bolton.”

She hummed in agreement. Every corner of their lives was fragile and they couldn’t be too careful, could never be too careful, the lesson that had to be learned in the worst way. Auriferous shadows jingled with the coins deep in their pockets because all shadows harbored a traitor who could easily be procured as a mercenary. A blade hidden up a cuff, a few drops of nightshade in spiced wine, an accidental fall, nothing would be easier.

To protect themselves from the maelstrom they won back—

No, she wouldn’t let herself think about such things, about so many endings when they’d only just begun. *Make the best of your circumstances*, Margery Tyrell advised her, strolling through the gardens in King’s Landing, her wedding to Tyrion Lannister on the horizon. The light in the dark, to realize her fortune in how she loved candidly and was loved immeasurably in return, those were the
things she needed to clutch onto. Clutch onto Jon.

He snored softly on her chest, and Sansa smiled, lazily tracked her fingertips between his shoulders blades, back and forth, back forth.

Then her smile flipped upside down.

She hadn’t thought of her pastel friend in quite some time, so preoccupied by her fear of finding Cersei Lannister in her mirror reflection that the very embodiment of the woman she could’ve been hadn’t snuck in. Though it fit Margery, the sneaking, to suddenly appear like a flower from her homeland, sprouting its bud in the spring after a dark winter.

The howling wind rampaged through the trees, slammed into the windows and chased the snow it dusted off the sills. Sansa heard the snowflakes swirl, smelled the cold air that managed to leak past the cracks and the puckers in the glass. She shivered when it at last touched her, goose bumps rising up on her skin.

Jon stirred. “What about you?” he inquired, turning his head the other way. “What has your attention today?”

“We need to walk through Winterfell and make notes on what repairs need to be done first. And now that Ramsay’s flayed victims have been identified, they should be returned to their families.” Sansa looked down her nose at him, picked a string of hair off his forehead. “Did you know that one of them was Jonelle Cerwyn? I don’t know how or when Ramsay abducted her, but Ser Kyle examined her body after he cut her down and he estimated she was the most recently skinned. She might’ve still been alive when they tacked her up.”

“The lords will expect a ceremony for her,” Jon said. “She may have bent the knee to Bolton, but she was a lady of the North and a chief Stark bannerman.”

Sansa nodded. “And I think we should organize a funeral for Ser Davos as well. Can we hold a joint funeral?”

“For Davos and Lady Cerwyn?”

“For Rickon and Ser Davos.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Good. I spoke with the kitchen staff about our food stores yesterday, but I plan to return. It’s getting colder by the hour,” she observed, nodding at the window to emphasize, “and we need a clear inventory of what we are plentiful in and what we are in desperate need of. I’d also like sit down with you and discuss whether we have enough grain and livestock to host a feast following the funerals.”

“I’ll find you after the free folk are settled,” Jon said. “But make sure to check on the wine stores as well. I don’t know if Ramsay was fond of his cups, but I watched these lords drink when we were younger. I remember they spent most of the suppers here drinking each other under the table.”

Yes, Sansa recalled that too. Glimpses of it, at least, sent to bed by her mother before the dignitaries were indecently scotched. Jon and Robb and Theon always crept back downstairs while she and Arya were put in charge of Bran and Rickon as practice for inevitable motherhood. But the men were rowdy enough and Sansa knew she wasn’t missing anything her highborn sensitivities disapproved of.
“I’m actually rather looking forward to Tormund giving the kneelers a run for their money in that department,” she remarked, drawing out the free folk’s sometimes slandering name for those abiding under the king’s monarchy. The tease earned a rumble of Jon’s laugh, thrumming straight into her chest and plummeting her heart into too many somersaults to count.

She pushed a hand through his hair. “But I’m not certain we can accommodate so many. We’re over capacity as it is.”

“We managed last night,” Jon reminded her, then sighed. “The lords won’t stay for longer than a sennight, I swear it. If their armies are gone for too long their holdings are defenseless and susceptible to marauders. The majority of the armies will be sent home and the lords will keep a hundred or so with them, and only long enough to be properly feted and adequately compensated for supporting us.”

“So many mouths to feed,” Sansa bemoaned. “The Iron Fleet will stay the longest because they have the farthest to travel. We should offer them rooms.”

“I reckon Theon’s already in his old room. Have you seen him yet?”

She smiled crookedly at the corners. “I have.”

(His was the first familiar face she spotted in the melee, Podrick and Lady Melisandre escorting her through the North Gate and into the inner ward resplendent with the bodies of men she sewed together with her crusade. A bow strapped to his chest and an empty quiver on his back, Theon ambled out of a far courtyard, looking like himself again.

Looking like the boy she remembered, Reek gone from his spine and his eyes and his smile.

Sansa’s breath hitched at such a sight.

She flung off her horse and wove around the bodies to him, twined her arms around his neck before her name parted from his lips. He reciprocated her embrace tentatively, and over his shoulder Sansa saw his sister watching them, she and Brienne and Tormund convened around something on the ground. Showing favorism in the form of physical affection towards anyone outside her line wasn’t duly wise, not then, not in front of so many, but she didn’t care.

Relief brightened her eyes with tears every time she found someone she cared for had survived the treachery of battle. And they had more than one battle that day, more than anyone would implicitly understand.

Like two feeble ruins touched by repairing hands, they emerged not exactly stable and not always without seared flesh, but alive.)

“Have you spoken with him or his sister yet?” Sansa inquired, scraping her nails along Jon’s scalp to rouse him if he’d dozed off.

Though softly, Jon replied, “Nothing except for a few words on the battlefield. I don’t know what to say to him. Appointments with Queen Yara will be simple enough; we’ll thank her for the Iron Fleet’s participation and negotiate a partnership of military excess and trade relations. But Theon…”

He smacked loud kisses along Sansa’s collarbone as he slipped away from her, onto his stomach and elbows staked beneath him. Having grown accustomed to his warmth blanketing her, she whined at the sudden chill of his leave, the way it rushed under the bedding to bombard her vulnerable skin. She pinched his nightshirt between her fingers, pulled on him, wanted him back. Jon smirked and they wiggled closer to each other in unison.
“Please be gentle with Theon,” Sansa implored him.

“Do you know how long Bolton tortured him for?”

She shook her head. “I asked once, but he wasn’t forthcoming with a definite answer. I don’t blame him for not wanting to relive his horrors.”

“Did knowing how he suffered ever change your anger towards him? Because he betrayed our whole family when he turned against Robb and set siege on Winterfell. When he deceived everyone into thinking he burned Bran and Rickon. I know he saved your life and I won’t ever forget that and I know you say he wants to make amends and I’m willing to attempt forgiveness, but I’m still conflicted.”

“So be conflicted,” Sansa insisted. “It took me a very long time to forgive. I still don’t know if I did when I jumped off the rampart with him. I don’t expect you to get to that place overnight and neither does he.”

Jon tied his fingers together under his chin and bowed his head, smudging his top lip with the pads of his thumbs. Inclining her head his way, Sansa crunched his curls in her hand, pulled on the screws until they straightened all the way to the tip and then let go, watching them spring back into place. “We grew up knowing he was a ward, a glorified hostage, but we never acknowledged it,” he mused. “I never knew how much he hated us, he was so good at hiding it.”

“You had that in common, the two of you.”

“I never hated any of you,” he refuted, grasping her wrist in a feathery grip and kissing each beat of her pulse point, all over her palm, her fingers.

“Are you so sure about that? Not once?” she teased. “What about the time Robb pushed you into the puddle while you were talking to the new kitchen girl?” Jon lifted his gaze to the canopy over their heads and shook his head. “Or the time Arya tattled on you to Father for teaching Bran to sword fight but not her? Or when Shaggydog defecated on Mother’s favorite rug and Rickon blamed Ghost? Or when I blamed you for the burned apple cakes? Or, or—”

“Alright, that’s enough from you!”

He assailed her sides at once. A shriek let into the air, stirring the quaint and content silence of the room and had anyone been posted outside they would’ve ambushed in that second. But no one was and the door did not fly off its hinges and Sansa’s face exploded in his face, she lurching off the bed, twisted and turned and kicked her legs as a hundred spiders and a thousand legs skittered all over her. The furs shook off their bodies, tangled in those flailing legs of hers, and Jon thrust up onto his knees as his fingers crawled along her ribs. Sansa squealed his name, roared “Jon, stop! Jon! Someone will hear!” and tried to grab his hands and halt the fevered attack. He merely laughed.

Barely over her guffaws did they hear the knock at the door, as insistent and urgent as her name shouted through the thick wood. “Lady Sansa, are you alright?”

“Lady Sansa, are you alright?”

“I’m – ah!” Jon dipped low towards her belly button, his lip caught between his teeth, and Sansa drew in her legs, rolling herself into a ball with his hands trapped inside. “I’m fine, Brienne,” she gasped, giggles losing their sound. “Th – Jon! Thank you, Brienne.”

Finally, amidst Jon’s mischievous cackles, Sansa captured his hands. She spun onto her front and brought him along with her, he pitching forward as she pinned his hands underneath her. Their chests gushed for air. Grins the length of Westeros splintered the flushes rising on their cheeks. Jon
flexed his hands across Sansa’s abdomen and she peered at him over her shoulder, such a look sobering the laughter built up in his throat.

Gods, how could she possibly love him this much? How could anyone love someone this much? How did anyone survive this intensity, this magnitude? It railroaded straight through her, ballooned her heart and migrated to her stomach, and then he bent in half and kissed her and she loved him more.

She rolled onto her back, the rustling bedding so loud in her ear, and he collapsed onto his forearms, bracketing her, aligning with her, the back of his hands brushing the blush off her cheeks and she loved him infinitely more.

And that felt wrong. Not being with him or being in bed with him, but being…happy.

If for a morning, if for just a few hours, Sansa Stark was happy.

She knew she shouldn’t be, not when the stones of their home were sick with the smell of funeral pyres and blood and filth, not when so many had lost their lives or lost irretrievable chunks of the lives, not when there were so few of them left. This place would never be like what they left behind, just as their family would never be like who they first were, and retrospectively Sansa had to admit her part in that destruction. Her youthful and childish want for Joffrey’s world pleaded with her father to accept as Hand of the King, drove them into the traitorous snake’s nest that turned out to be King’s Landing.

That girl wanted more until she realized more wasn’t always synonymous with better.

Her smile faded as the thought barraged her.

But Jon kissed that smile back into existence, dropped his lips on her nose and her cheek and jaw and collarbone, sucked the hollow of her neck and pelted the narrow valley between her breasts, and Sansa shattered into giggles once more. Locked her wrists behind his neck as he ascended and kissed him until her lips were sore.

Maybe she had to survive everything she went through. Maybe she had to survive Father’s death and Joffrey’s cruelty and Tyrion as her husband and fleeing with Petyr and suffering Ramsay’s brutality. Maybe Jon did too; maybe he had to survive his Night’s Watch oath and his trek north of the Wall and opposing his brothers and his first love’s death and dying himself.

Maybe all of that meant this. Sansa wasn’t a fatalist – she lost sight of any power propelling her a certain way a long time ago – but she thought maybe she and Jon were always meant for here, for this moment. For mobilizing the North and taking back the home that was pillaged from them. For finding each other and loving each other.

Maybe here was always the light at the end of the pitch-black tunnels they had to survive to get to.

By the time Jon pried himself from Sansa and out of bed the moon had faded behind a new host of clouds charging in from the west, the smell of its wind promising a fresh delivery of freezing rain that’d threaten icicles in every archway and threshold. They were reluctant to go, to part, kept stealing kisses on the other’s lips so they ended up exactly where they were to begin with. He just tasted so good, felt so good, his want obvious through the layers, don’t make him go.

Some would’ve called their long morning unacceptable, called it undiplomatic and lazy and certainly selfish, because any lord and lady who extended the luxury of recovery until they’d expired the very
last of their excuses were immature to say the least. Unfit to rule at the most.

And had those people scoffed to her face Sansa would’ve agreed with them.

They were being undiplomatic, hoarding as much time for themselves as possible while the castle burgeoned with life outside their door and the kitchen’s flaky fragrance rumbled their stomachs. Sansa was being lazy, sat cross-legged in their disheveled nest and threading her hair into a sloppy braid for some semblance of order. And Jon was being selfish, cruelly so, bordering on bedeviling, lacing his doublet out of her reach, his smallclothes peeking above the waistband of his braies.

He glanced up at her while his fingers fiddled, one short string that dodged her culling for his bun harassing his cheek. “I’ll see you downstairs?”

“If the kitchen staff hasn’t run out of food by now,” Sansa remarked, tying off her braid. In her lap she scratched a nail over her bone comb’s teeth.

“You do remember you’re Lady of the House, correct? They will find you food.”

She rolled her eyes, but smiled, too. Jon braced his knuckles on the bed in front of her, and lips itching higher, she welcomed him into the hoop of her arms. He tilted his head comically, rocked back and forth on the ball of his feet, toying with her she thought, closer then farther, closer then farther, always a fraction too far away.

Then he pecked her lips and moved to leave just as fast, but Sansa held onto him steadfast, not as ready to let go despite her earlier needling. Not with so quick a kiss, too quick a kiss. Stirred, she swallowed his lips, scooted forward to near edge of the bed and teased her legs up the back of his. Jon grinned into the kiss, whispered, “I love you,” centimeters parting their lips.

“I love you,” Sansa whispered back, nuzzling their noses.

It’d be the last time they were able to say such things that day, unlikely to be left alone except, hopefully, to visit the garderobe. Not until her handmaidens dressed her for bed then took their leave would they be this again. She didn’t know why that dimmed her felicity, why it fueled her boldness to have some things now, because carrying on clandestinely was only temporary, evinced in a matter of months, even weeks.

They could wait a little while. They had to.

“You know, we’ll have to be careful more now,” she exacted aloud. “If anyone discovers our relationship has evolved…”

She was proud to be his and proud to have him, but if anyone found out before they confirmed Lord Reed’s story or before they figured out how best to explain this happening…they’d be maligned. If not worse, like executed. She’d tolerate a Lannister or a Frey or any lord who profited off her family’s misfortunes thinking pejoratively of her, but others. Others like Brienne and Theon and those little girls… They’d call her vile, think her and Jon accursed and noxious, find a way to liberate themselves from their pledges the moment they were able, refuse to serve or support a lamia like her.

“We’ll practice utmost discretion until the time’s right,” Jon assured her.

He kissed her, leisurely this time, and though the testament of affection was small, was ordinary, something she spied her parents do on the regular when they thought no one saw and something she hoped her children witnessed on the regular as well, her heart stuttered. Her breath took a wrong turn in her chest. She beamed so big her cheeks began to ache.
“But it has to be more than that,” she argued, though she felt the floor under her feet weakened to eggshells the moment she said it. “I’m certain it’s apparent to the people we’ve crossed paths with recently that we’ve grown close since reuniting. Where one of us goes the other isn’t far behind. I know the feel of your hand in mine while we walk the camp and I remember every place you’ve ever kissed me.”

“And?”

Sansa’s arms fell from Jon’s shoulders. “And I don’t think it wise we change our relationship publicly if we don’t want anyone to know it has privately.”

“How long will that go on?” Jon questioned. “Everyone will find out eventually. For instance, when we’re respectively offered sons and daughters of the neighboring lords for marriage and we turn down every single prospect without good reason. That in and of itself will incite gossip.”

She closed her eyes. Picked at the pleats in her skirt. “I understand that, but…”

Why did she bring this up? She should’ve abandoned the subject at his agreement, should’ve been pleased with that and left it alone. They were happy not two minutes ago and now the eggshells were flattened, stabbing her where she stood. Instead of going downstairs empowered and floating she’d have this crushing her chest for the rest of the day. “To everyone outside this room we’re still brother and sister. If one person finds out we’re romantic—”

Jon crossed his arms. “Even though we are.”

“Please don’t read too much into what I’m saying,” Sansa pled. She rose onto her knees and reached out to him, scaling down his arms and wanting his hands, desperately pulling on them. But it was like pulling on a statue. “I want us to be careful so we can stay together. That vision you told me about last night, us ruling Winterfell together and starting our own pack, I want that.”

“As do I.”

She grasped his face in her hands. “Then we must to be alive to have it. And to stay alive you need to realize these people will not take the news of us lightly. They’ll be more unforgiving than I was at the start of last night when I called myself sick because that’s exactly what they’ll call us. We have to choose our next move carefully. We need time to bolster our explanation and plan our announcement.”

“Why must we explain? What business is it of anyone else’s who you or I choose to love?”

“Because that’s not a choice in our world and you sound naïve for even suggesting it is,” she snapped. “Every flirtation is for information, every romance for position, and every union for an alliance. Don’t you understand where I’m coming from? At least a little?”

Please understand, she beseeched him. She didn’t put it past Petyr to be so astute as to notice even a微be difference in their interactions. Everyone warned her of Lord Varys’ little birds pecking around in King’s Landing’s business, but she didn’t doubt Petyr employed buzzards of his own. And that such buzzards migrated north with him.

They had to be careful. They had to put the greatest care into being careful. If she didn’t want to think about endings to something just begun, she even more didn’t want to think their downfall was something as avoidable as being too loving or unexplainably not loving enough.

“I understand, but I don’t like it,” he replied solemnly, and then backed away from her, strode across the room and snatched his cloak from the window alcove on his way.
Sansa couldn’t help the sinking feeling that she’d offended him. That he thought she was ashamed of him. It was the furthest thing from the truth, but reviewing her words, she understood his thought process and scolded herself for the insensitivity. For such carelessness.

She said his name as she climbed out of bed. No more than a whisper, a whimper, but he heard. He heard and he paused, kept his back to her and didn’t dare look over his shoulder, hand frozen where it reached for the handle. “Please don’t be mad at me,” Sansa begged. “I just want you to be safe. I need you to be safe.”

“I know. I want you safe, too,” Jon said. “But I’m tired of hiding. I’ve done it my whole life and I thought after last night I wouldn’t have to do it anymore.”

“It’s only for a little while.”

“That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.”

Brienne stood to the right of the door, a silver wall cloaking another, hand at ease on her sword and studious in not permitting anyone to loiter in the corridor (Jon’s assignment, Sansa learned overnight). She turned her head at the sound of the door creaking open, expected to find her charge dressed and ready to accomplish the day but instead found Jon in a state of what Brienne took to calling ‘brooding’.

The exact opposite of how Sansa wanted him to leave, opposite of how she wanted to end their perfectly lovely morning together. Why did she have to go and open her mouth? Why did it come out so wrong? Why did she have to put it as though she didn’t want anyone to know about them? The whys muddied her mind and every footprint he left as he walked away was another one.

“Good morning, Lord Commander Snow,” Brienne bid him. Sansa could practically hear the smirk quirking the corner of her mouth.

She slinked to her dressing table, bones like lead where they were feathers before. Comb in one hand and hand mirror in the other, she set both down then strayed to the window, looking down into the yard, firmly coated in unblemished and pristine snow. “Brienne, will you come in here for a moment?”

“Your handmaidens came by twice, but I told them you hadn’t awoken yet,” Brienne explained as she clinked into the chamber. Her armor sounded heavy, sounded like thunder in the quiet. Sansa glanced at her, but she didn’t notice, her eyes roaming every crevice. “I suspected Lord Commander Snow was still in your company and told them you’d call upon them when you were ready. Would you like me to fetch them for you?”

Sansa smiled. “Yes. Thank you, Brienne.”

As more or less agreed upon, Jon and Sansa exited her chamber near the same as they’d entered and no one was the wiser. Leaving Sansa to fret and labor over why the distance didn’t feel right.

She forcibly squashed the unease before it further infected her mind.

Tormund returned with the wildlings at midday, the band of women, children, and elderly trudging through snow thick enough to sink their feet in. The man who first spotted them from the ramparts
snuck into the Great Hall alongside the kitchen staff, kept in the shadows as the servants scurried
to fill and refill (and refill) cups of ale and juice. He hesitated to interrupt an
official conference betwixt the houses, fidgeting in the corner of Sansa’s eye while the lords
discussed how best to install the free folk in the North, among other things.

“For fuck’s sake, man,” Lord Glover finally snapped, banging his hand on the table and
consequently spilling ale on his neighbor, who lurched to his feet and shook his arm, splattering
the pavers. Lord Glover glared at the young guard. “What do you want?”

“Pardon me, my lords,” the man stammered. He was young, likely a butcher or farmer or blacksmith
drafted to position after Robb deployed to war, but he was also smart enough not to meet anyone’s
gaze as he started down the aisle in front of the High Table. “Lord Commander Snow, Lady Stark,
the last of the wildlings have arrived,” he informed them, wringing his hands.

Jon sat up in his chair. “How far away are they?”

“One or two miles, my lord.”

He nodded, glancing briefly at Sansa. “My lords,” he addressed, his voice booming across the rows
stretched out before him and to the very back of the room, echoing off the beams, “I petition we take
a recess and reconvene in two hours.”

Sansa scanned the men and women. His allegiance to the free folk community still didn’t sit pretty
with northerners, least of all the noble northerners, their distrust emblazoned by recounted stories
from various villages and farmers who were pillaged by rogue marauders and panic for their holdings
enflamed by the same. She expected an uproar at Jon’s request, but the hall grumbled and complied,
some standing to stretch their legs and others swiveling around to their drinks.

It’d been a discordant discussion anyway, if Sansa were honest. Injurious to its core and no real loss
in stabling. They’d talked in circles since her and Jon’s first bite of breakfast, and the only thing
everyone agreed upon was staying Ramsay’s execution for another day.

The rest was… as she said, inimical.

War debts endowed to them by both Ramsay and Robb drowned Winterfell’s purse and once the
castle’s restorations were underway those debts would double or multiply three-fold. On that topic
alone she and Jon needed much counseling. Elsewhere, as winter began to bury them and spoil every
harvest rancid along with it, they needed to know how to better and affordably feed their people,
how to employ deliveries from local farmers who could provide the provisions they couldn’t grow in
the Glass Garden.

Together Jon and Sansa accompanied the guard downstairs, crossed the yard as Tormund led the
herd through the barbican, ushering them with the spear he twisted in hand, pointing where to go and
who to speak to and where best to camp. The five Mormont soldiers appointed to watch his six were
the last inside and they immediately detached from the newcomers, nodded to Jon in passing and
continued into the grove where their army, rough as they were, shared their camp.

Bracing a hand on Jon’s shoulder, Sansa lifted onto her tiptoes. Counted every one they stashed
underground as present and accounted for. “They’re all here,” she assured herself aloud.

She swayed suddenly off-balanced, tipped over into Jon. He rested his hand on the small of her back,
clamp the other on her stomach. “Alright?” She hummed positively. To the guard Jon asked, “Has
the army we sent to the Dreadfort been seen yet?”
The man did not answer, or did not hear in the first place. Despite Winterfell’s proximity to the Wall, he wasn’t familiar with wildlings – wasn’t part of the campaign, hadn’t traveled with them or lived in their camp – and was thus fascinated and enraptured by the immigrating refugees, stared unabashedly. Jon cleared his throat and only then did the man startle, did he say, “No, my lord.”

“When someone does, have them notify me,” Jon added.

“Yes, my lord.”

The herd was heaviest in the middle, clumped and huddled not to ward against the cold but because there was safety in numbers and what was more unsafe than a generous lord on treaty land. Half a head taller than Jon, Sansa barely located the women she'd befriended amidst the mass. She discerned Gretta first, bouncing Aja’s red-faced and wailing nephew in her arms while Aja waddled close behind, unhindered by the crying, practically dragging Johanna and Willa by either hand, they trying so hard to keep pace but not yet tall enough.

Willa sucked on her whole hand, jerked her head all around as she observed her new surroundings, never seen walls so tall or people so crowded. She noticed Sansa as her gaze fell from one of the bastions, but instead of wrenching from her sister’s grasp as she’d done in Mole’s Town, she popped her shiny hand out of her mouth and waved. Sansa waved back.

“And inform the other guards stationed with you of my edict as well,” Jon tacked on.

He didn’t have to wait long. Not at all. Only until that very afternoon, in fact.

Jon and Sansa found the same guard – “Stuart, my lord. My mother named me Stuart,” he informed them after Jon restored him to his post on the ramparts – waiting for them at the top of the stairs when they ascended from the crypts.

(The crypts were the last place Sansa wanted to visit at a time like this, but Jon insisted when she really should’ve insisted the other way. She’d forgotten about the half dozen statues Ramsay shattered during his dictatorship, or, maybe better for her psyche’s stability, she’d repressed the memory. That moment of discovery, sneaking away from Ramsay’s watchdogs to seek solace in her long-gone ancestors only to find them pulverized to pieces at her feet, it was too painful. Too powerful.

If chaos was a ladder, as Petyr so astutely ascertained, then Ramsay’s every act of malice controlled her for nights to come. He meant to cow her, to entrench her further under his thumb.

Demolishing the crypts, it wasn’t just her Ramsay damaged under the skin. His parasite intended to infect every Stark that once was or would be.

And thus far, by show of Jon’s startle, he succeeded.

Though it’d forever be a mystery how exactly he succeeded. Why the wreckage so affected them. They’d grown up surrounded by ghosts – haunted by them, in Jon’s case – and Sansa designed herself to flawlessly ignore their omnipresence, and yet… Losing even a fragment of her relatives again, even a wisp, even a chip, refreshed that original loss.)

Sansa sewed her arm through Jon’s, hooked them up to each other and as inconspicuously as possible darted her gaze to everyone loitering in the inner ward with them. She hoped they didn’t look wrong, hoped they looked normal. Prayed no one noticed Jon’s glance at their conjoined arms turn into a stare, prayed no one noticed how she itched to hold his hand instead, that doesn’t mean it
doesn’t hurt that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt speeding around and around in her mind.

Nothing of the same concerned Jon. He eventually looked elsewhere, passed the pebbles of Eddard Stark’s commemoration between his hands. Watching him toss them about, watching his quaint reflection of them, Sansa was glad Ramsay spared Lyanna. She wasn’t sure what inspired the selection (and really, she should’ve learned by now not to questions the whys), whether he picked Lyanna because he believed her jejune or, worse, because he admired the blight she unintentionally caused, but it was worth not seeing the devastation on Jon’s face if he found his mother destroyed mere hours after learning of her importance.

The levers to the eastern gate pulled to life, drawbridge clicking down beyond it, and like a mirage a bar of black and gray stepped onto the horizon. Administered to a long-since-neglected castle as an attempted distraction, Sansa knew battle demanded casualties and traipsing into Bolton territory she was realistic enough to expect some. But not this many. Not the high volume reduction that limped through the gates and past her and Jon.

Their numbers were slashed from fifteen hundred of the strongest, most agile warriors to a mere four hundred.

If that.

Jon started forward at once, stomping on the inside line of troops. “What happened?” he demanded to know, fusing to the graying older man Sansa remembered Tormund calling Dim Dalba. “Where are the rest of you?”

“We were followed,” Dim Dalba explained, skirting a glance at Jon but not pausing. They flowed with the current of people and Sansa hustled to keep their pace, craning her ears to fetch their next words over the high wind and din of the new collective. “One of our own, Genrick, noticed it on the second night. By third morning the other chieftains and I decided to split into smaller clans and stall five volunteers behind to confirm Genrick’s suspicions.”

“And were they confirmed?” Jon prompted.

“Aye. Our scouts estimated there to be two thousand soldiers.”

“Boltons?”

Dim Dalba shrugged. As he did, Sansa noticed a split in his vest, from the hem at his waist to within inches of his left armpit. Likewise, a gash cut wide across his forehead, brow to temple hairline. A survey of the others told Sansa he was in the best shape of all of them. “I can’t say, King Crow. I didn’t see them,” he said. “We thought they were some kneeler’s army being sent your way for the fight, but then warriors from the other clans began arriving at camps claiming the stalkers attacked them in the dark. They slaughtered us.”

“Seven hells,” Jon murmured under his breath.

“We were forced to merge our numbers again. By the time we arrived at the place you sent us we’d lost a third of our force in the nights. The army had vanished by then. Those of us who survived the attack at the castle never saw them again.”

Panic spiked through the surface of Sansa’s insides, pried into her heart and popped her veins. She barely found voice enough to say, “They were gone?”

Dim Dalba glanced back at her, aware of her presence for the first time. He regarded her up and down. “Vanished, m’lady,” he clarified.
Vanished. How was that possible? How did two thousand men disappear? She’d heard stories from Old Nan and the smallfolk about the goings on in the woods, but even the mist laden on the forest floor couldn’t make a human evaporate. There had to be another explanation; maybe the Skagos clans romped too far south or hunters caught their scent in the Lonely Hills and tailed them.

Or, since Ramsay’s soldiers were not the ones to blame for stalking and murdering the wildlings, maybe someone else was.

And if that were the case… If Jon wanted to take responsibility for the Free Folk then Sansa would help him find the party to hold accountable. This was her doing, after all; retaking Winterfell and provoking Ramsay by attacking the Dreadfort had been her idea. If she’d just gone so far south the land ran out under her feet the wildlings wouldn’t be here and the armies wouldn’t be here and none of them would’ve had to die. Jon could’ve come with her. They could’ve settled in Sunspear, found his friend in Old Town, and maybe in those places no one would recognize the aliases they painted on their faces. They wouldn’t have anyone to explain to or prepare for.

So far away from this they would’ve had a chance at happiness.

But they lost their chance for that, and doubtless it’d ever come back for them again.

Sansa scrunched her fingers in Dim Dalba’s sleeve, halting him in his tracks. Like many wildlings she’d encountered, he was less intimidating up close, the wrinkles of his face as long as the lines on Old Nan’s, his forehead a great globe and his nose hooking over his mustache. He stared down at her hand, but made no move to dissuade her otherwise. “This Genrick,” she said, “where is he?”

“Not now, Sansa,” Jon hissed at her side.

“Back there,” Dim Dalba answered, flicking his eyes to meet hers. They were so, so green, as green as the spring. “With the girl.”

“Girl?” Sansa echoed.

He nodded. “A prisoner he scavenged in the castle. Under the castle, I don’t know. Lofty lady, from the looks of her.”

A highborn? At so dreadful a place? His brows clenched, Jon looked to Sansa and in that look she read the same questions as hers. But she was clueless to their answers. At least as Lord Commander Jon could’ve eavesdropped on whatever town gossip his brothers brought back. He could’ve requested to be kept informed of southern occurrences. Sansa could’ve as well. Hells, it would’ve been easier to get her hands on such information, but she isolated herself from the moment her wedding night ended. She swaddled herself in shame and was too scared to peek out unless forced to attend a meal. Even then, however, Roose didn’t trust his wife and daughter-in-law enough to discuss politics unhampered, sharply reprimanded Ramsay when he broached the subject.

In all that time she hadn’t heard of any lords losing a daughter or any ladies gone missing. But if a highborn lady was found at the Dreadfort and more specifically underneath it, they had to assume she was a hostage (in the best circumstance, a plaything in the worst).

The girth of the army passed behind Jon and Dim Dalba, proceeding further into the inner ward and to where Sansa didn’t know. The keeps were full, the corridors and the Guest House too, the godswood’s three acres and Winter town filling up rapidly. Soon there’d be nowhere left for anyone to stand, nevertheless lie horizontal. She and Jon should’ve better strategized how to accommodate everyone instead of dismissing it as they’d done it once and they’d do it again, but that wasn’t her first concern at the moment.
They needed to find the highborn girl and this Genrick, a task easily rendered if they’d stayed a pair, but harder if they’d separated. More so if they’d scattered throughout the castle. Granted, they could find a noble girl amidst wildlings, but finding a battered girl and her savior amidst a mass of four hundred wildlings was another story altogether. Especially if Genrick claimed her as a prize, hiding her as they were oft to do.

If everyone aligned the same, her testimony combined with Genrick’s and the scouts would be enough to confirm guilt, to bring whoever policed and eradicated the wildlings to justice. And they would be brought to justice. They would answer for their crimes. Sansa would make sure of it.

“Your scouts, are they still alive?” she asked Dim Dalba.

“Two of them are,” he responded.

Sansa nodded. She rubbed her hands together for warm, cupped them over her mouth and blew. The faces of the men and women blurred into one, rows and rows and rows, every one of them soiled in their blood and the carnage of someone else, hair blown off their faces and stuck upright like a crown. Cold blanched their skin, scrubbed their cheeks and noses red, giving them a weather-beaten pallor.

They looked like she did when she arrived at Castle Black, like frostbite and gangrene and death.

And as Lady of Winterfell and Wardeness of the North, she was responsible for every life that sought sanctuary in her home.

Including her. There.

Sheltered under the arm of a wildling man was a woman – a girl, more like, whittling herself to nothing and already dwarfed by the man she clutched tightly on to, digging painfully into him if he could feel through all those layers. What used to be comfortable day dress hanged on her malnourished frame, the skirt ripped in two, all the way up to the crack of her thighs and Sansa didn’t want to think about what else, who else cracked her thighs, their experience at the hand of a Bolton probably one in the same.

Her curly auburn hair had grown too long and flaccidly curtainied the face she pointed firmly at the ground, didn’t even look up at Jon and Sansa as she staggered by them.

“We’d like to speak with them as soon as possible,” Sansa told Dim Dalba and then promptly tailed Genrick and the girl, Jon kicking up her cloak’s hem as he followed. At a safe distance, she pondered to him, “Where did Ramsay have room to spare two thousand men?”

“He didn’t,” Jon agreed. “Someone else followed them.”

He veered to the left, to Tormund, enlisted the man’s savvy in approaching the pair. And though Sansa wanted to contradict the need for such action, wanted to expound the many reasons they didn’t need Tormund’s help (a highborn lady might recognize another highborn lady, for example, or she and the girl had experienced similar trials and would therefore connect that way), she knew he was right to. She knew they were strangers to the both of them no matter their titles or how many doors they opened as a haven, untrustworthy until proven otherwise.

It helped little in the end, anyway; despite Tormund vouching for them and despite the familiarity with which others greeted Jon, persuading Genrick and the girl to forfeit the safety they accumulated in such a massive pack proved as difficult as bolstering the northern lords, if not more. Genrick alone was reluctant, but the girl…
Traumatized by her captivity (and understandably so), she withdrew further into herself at their advance. Alarmed by anyone who wasn’t Genrick and the arm named pillar he tightened around her. Skittish from any sound, from any flash of a movement. Sansa’s heart plummeted at the sight of the girl. She knew that fear well, all too well, lived in it for seven months and that was seven months too long, and Gods, how did this girl survive twice that, triple that, four times that long?

When she realized using men to influence her one way or another wasn’t the best course of action, Sansa spoke gently to her, lenitively, like cautioning up to a startled filly she needed to grasp the reins of. She didn’t dare ask them to trust her, knotted her hands and didn’t dare reach out either. In her mind touch was a miraculous healer if used by the right person, witnessed its work on her when she found Jon again, but it wasn’t for this girl, not now, not yet, not unless it came from Genrick, whose strength built his size and whose size protected her from affliction. Hair matted past his shoulders and beard grizzly shaped, he was ill-suited for a noble lady if that’s what she indeed was. But softness lined his gruff, too, handsome underneath it all, and upon better assessment, Sansa saw why the girl attached herself to him.

Where Genrick would go the girl would go, and doubtless it worked the other way around too.

Finally, their combined efforts coaxed the pair to accompany them to the Great Hall.

As they walked Sansa noticed the girl’s shutters opening up, curiously peering up at Sansa and the castle through her hair. Her head perked up and up the further into the castle they got, staring not in the same frantic manner Willa did but in a way Sansa curiously couldn’t name. In a way she thought nostalgic.

The lords convoked for their earlier conference had blessedly emptied the room by then, but servants still swarmed about, clearing tables and prepping for dinner like a rehearsed orchestra. More than was necessary jumped to retrieve the blanket and tea Jon beckoned for; Sansa reasoned the wildlings made them uneasy, especially when two – potentially three, depending on how feral the girl was – marched into the four walls of the castle instead of being in its outskirts like the rest of them were relegated.

Shrinking out from under Genrick, the girl sat down at a table and several minutes later the women returned with quilts heaped in their arms and a tray resplendent with tea and nibbles, set it down with shaking hands and departed without ever looking up.

And it wasn’t until several minutes after that that Sansa recognized the girl.

“Beth?” she asked, couldn’t believe it, didn’t sound right or real even as it came out. Cocooned in one of the patched quilts and a cup of tea sweltering in her hands, the girl didn’t react to the name, skirted even a flinch. Sansa tried again anyway. “Beth, is that you?”

Jon staggered incredulously, “You know her?”

“As do you. I think this is Beth Cassel,” Sansa said. “Ser Rodrick’s daughter.”

Winterfell’s master-at-arms’ only daughter and only surviving child. Sansa hadn’t seen Beth since she and Arya relocated south with Father, but she didn’t look heinously different, time more decent to her than it was to Jaime Lannister or any of Walder Frey’s offspring. The years had waned her, dulled her, and more than just her skin sagged, but her cherubic lips were as pink as ever and her hair, which had rivaled Sansa’s in lushness once she graduated childhood, had darkened slightly in color.

Born in the same calendar year as Arya, Sansa suddenly wondered how her little sister had changed,
if she wasn’t so little, so scrawny, anymore. If it’d take her as long to recognize her.

“Beth, it’s Sansa. Whatever you went through, it’s over now. You’re safe, Beth. Alright? It’s over now.” Beth pressed her lips. Sansa pinched Jon’s sleeve between two fingers and took a step closer. Her gaze flicked to Genrick as he straightened next to the girl. “You found her in the castle?”

“Wit’ the dogs,” he replied after staring at her for a long while, added, “Caged up like one of ‘em.”

His brogue tongue was harsh, arduous to understand, deeper than Tormund’s and guttural like mumbling. He observed them through narrowed eyes, his shoulders beset with tension and inclined more towards Beth than the three circling him. Though he was entitled to his reticence, Sansa hesitated in pushing either for further details. Even though she needed those details – even though they needed those details.

Therefore, she pushed without regard for her self-preservation. “Dim Dalba told us you were the one who first discovered you were being followed. Could you tell if they were Bolton soldiers? Did they fly flags of burning men?”

Genrick shook his head. “They ’ad birds on ’em.”

“Birds?” Jon repeated.

There may have been hundreds, if not thousands, of house between Westeros to Essos, but there were only so many coat of arms featuring birds: House Cargyll’s golden goose pecking around the Crownlands, House Erenford flying a heron and House Cockshaw crowned in feathers in the Reach, House Mertyn’s hooting owl in the Stormlands, House Serrett’s preening peacock in the Westerlands, House Blackmont’s scavenging vulture in Dorne, and, of course, the Vale’s House Arryn, among a myriad of others.

House Arryn. Sweetrobin. Littlefinger. Sansa looked up at Jon as the thought occurred to her and from the look of him he was thinking the same and realizing the same.

Convened at the very last table, the servants hadn’t yet cleaned that far back in the hall. Cloth napkins and ripped parchment excess littered the surface and at either end of the table were two petite inkwells of iron gall ink, one feather quill laid diagonal and the other rolled near to the edge and both dripping a pool under the tip.

Cagily, as not to spook Beth, who took tentative sips of her tea flush to her chest, Sansa snatched up a scroll and then dipped the quill in the ink, scraping it along the inkwell’s rim as it didn’t bleed onto the wood or through the paper during transfer. Her artistic skills were limited to embroidery and dress-making and any sketch she made as a child looked like chicken scratch, but she drew the Arryn falcons as best she could. Once she finished the crude outline she shaded in its periphery and then held it up in front of Genrick.

She tapped the sigil. “Did it look like this?”

“Aye,” Genrick confirmed, “that’s it.”

“The Knights of the Vale,” Jon breathed. Blinked rapidly as if he could make it disappear because it wasn’t true, it wasn’t real. But he hadn’t listened to Sansa when she told him not to trust the man. Instead he’d drafted a peace accord the moment he invited Littlefinger to join their cause and was then shocked Littlefinger had signed the document in fool’s gold, committing a heinous affront right under his nose.

He didn’t believe it was real, didn’t want to, but Sansa did. Of course she did. The lordling Robin
would never make such an edict, nor would Lord Royce, but Littlefinger, who had influence over Robin and whom Lord Royce had to obey lest he lose his head for rebelling, oh, he absolutely would. The wildlings threatened the structure of the northern realm and they were newcomers, people he hadn’t weaseled into the good graces of or sunk his claws into. It’d be hard to do either and in his eye that made the community as a whole unpredictable.

For a man who historically wanted his influence to see the crown exchange heads, people he couldn’t predict were cause for concern. And people he couldn’t control or exploit for his own gains…people like that were better six feet below ground than six feet above it.

“When we ask, will you testify to who and what you saw?” Sansa inquired of Genrick.

“Aye.”

She folded the paper into fourths, sliced her nail across the crease so many times while she contemplated what to do next it made a hissing sound. Their situation required Petyr and his forces for a couple more things and as they weren’t one hundred percent solvent with him quite yet, ambushing him with their conjecture before the evidence had time to marinate and before they sufficiently built their case wasn’t the best course. But if they gave themselves that time, if they built their case and then used it as leverage when he undoubtedly rotated full circle to his marriage proposal, they’d have him irrepresibly backed into a corner.

Or, better yet, they could undermine his authority by informing the other lords of his treachery. The North may not favor the wildlings, but they were loyal to their king and they knew no king but the King in the North, whose name is Stark.

A long time ago Grand Maester Pycelle argued, “Who knows what treason she may hatch,” when once Sansa futilely groveled for her father’s life.

None of them understood she did not have the cunning for it. The intelligence, yes, but not the malevolence, not the omnipotence. She’d been taught too inflexible a set of rules: sit still, look pretty, lips zipped and smile well.

She spent her whole life in these lessons, schooled by her mother, by Old Nan, by Cersei when it became imperative that she follow the parameters meticulously. They became gradually tedious for Arya, her focus often flickering to the windows singing a swordplay tune, but Sansa was an apt student, the best pedigree had to offer. And in her constant stride for the lush title of princess she came to understand why it was sometimes better to hold her tongue and how to do as was needed and not so much what was wanted.

Play their game, Mother said and Old Nan said and Cersei implied.

Try not to lose.

Sharing a dinner table with Littlefinger, the shine rusting off his truths like they were completely bare from his words, was the hardest trial and one she knew for certain she’d lost. She’d zipped her lips and looked pretty long enough, and, Gods, did she want to unroll her tongue. She wanted to slap the smirk off his face, wanted to demand explanation for the genocide committed on his command, wanted to put him in chains down there with Ramsay or at the very least wanted to lock him in the stocks and have him whipped.

Beside her Jon vibrated with the same desires, jaw pulsing as Littlefinger clinked the side of his
goblet and pivoted to address the hall. He feted the North’s victory and raised his glass, and Sansa clawed her nails at the wood, nudged the chair back and began to stand. But then Jon’s hand lurched onto the table and pressed her arm down and she still. Looked sharply at him. Glowered.

The hall jeered, Littlefinger’s ruckus a pitch louder than the rest, and Jon shook his head, told her no, stay seated, keep looking pretty and restore your smile, we’ll slay him another day.

Perhaps Pycelle was correct when he predicted Sansa may birth treasons of her own, but for tonight those lessons saved her life again, another of too many ways to count. Let the dog have his day, she decided, pretending to flare her skirt and taking her seat. Let him think he’d deceived Jon and Sansa. Let him think he’d won.

But until the time of annihilation came, how did one go about protecting a whole race of people from one man whose reach was too long for anyone’s good?

At first light of the next day Ramsay Bolton, first of his name, Lord of the Dreadfort and Usurper of the North, was executed.

(Finally, Sansa thought, tapering off to sleep last night, warm against Jon’s chest and her back to the door because she didn’t have to sleep with one eye open anymore, didn’t have to cower or quiver with her husband hanging in the same chains his hounds got their namesakes from. Finally, she murmured, her hand snagged in Jon’s and absorbing every ounce of his reassurance as they trekked downstairs to the main courtyard.)

“You don’t have to be here,” Jon remarked in her ear as she accepted one of the distributed torches. She’d be the last summoned forth to catch the dry hay crowded at the saltire’s base, the head cook and Ser Kyle and Theon before her. They’d set aside a torch exclusively for Beth Cassel, but it’d gone instead to the kennel master when Beth refused to stray from the room Sansa assigned her. “I can take care of this.”

“No,” Sansa said, glanced at Theon’s knuckles burning white around the torch he held lengths away from his body. Then she looked at Jon, said steadily, “I want to be here.”

Her hair bristled on her shoulders. The clouds – which formerly claimed to be gravid with sleet and rain but were now no more than a ferocious gust frosting the hairs under their cuffs – courted the bloody affair, leapt down onto the land and settled a thick fog at their feet. Beads of dew sparkled on their shoes and every stride dispersed the mist, sent swirls into the air already clogged wet.

As the sun rose up over the horizon it pierced the lone saltire Jon remounted inside the castle walls, setting it ablaze before a lick of fire ever touched the wood. The original idea had been to erect the saltire on the side of the kingsroad, its placement strategic, purposeful, to make an example of him for all the realm to see, but this way it was protect from the wind by the high curtain walls. Jon promised to let the flames die on their own (or replenish them if they doused too fast), its smoke apparent in the sky day and night.

Sansa held onto those words, clutched onto them as though they sung a proclamation she still feared saying aloud. The Starks had returned to Winterfell, it declared, and they’d never be conquered again. She’d never be conquered again.

In her heart it was a comfort, one of only a few sources of ease she’d get on this day, at this hour.
She knew the procedure for an execution; this wasn’t her first and certainly wouldn’t be her last. And yet a pondering gasped at the surface of her mind, gulping for purchase: even after Ramsay was gone, would she ever really be relieved of his haunting?

No, she told herself. She would be relieved, right here, right now. This was where it ended. This was how it ended.

The door to the Guard’s Hall creaked open, a hush falling over the crowd, and Sansa closed her eyes. Repeated it – never be conquered, it ends, never be conquered, it ends – in time to the plodding footfall colluding her ears, his spidery fingers reaching closer and closer. Behind her she heard the audience part like a rapturous sea. She heard them spit, heard their angry mutters and more than a couple sweeps of glee.

She had to look, had to force herself to watch like Bran said when he came back from witnessing that deserter’s execution. Ramsay couldn’t have such power over her until his very last breath.

He didn’t have such power.

Over her shoulder Sansa watched him be marched down the aisle, paraded before dozens and dozens and dozens of death wishes cursing his name. A convoy safeguarded her back and Jon and Theon bookended either side of her, explicitly bracketing her, not a side left vulnerable to unanticipated movement, but until someone chained Ramsay to that saltire, until fire smoked his feet, paranoia lanced through her. Possessed her. She wrung her torch.

Jon squeezed her other hand, whispered her name with a pinch between his brows. “I’m alright,” she waved him off, regimented herself forward. She tucked closer to him, then, so that she may not feel even a brush as Ramsay broke through the audience.

She had no reason to fear him any longer. In truth, pinioned and so weak his rope leash dragged him, he didn’t have life left in him to cause her misery. His fate dangled in a cabinet, puncture wounds the size of a sewing needle pockmarked his body everywhere above the waist. Large pools of blood crusted his chin and stained between his legs from, Sansa only assumed, Yara severing his tongue and then castrating him. Sansa knew the Ironborn had a sick sense of humor, battered by isolation as they were, but she hadn’t realized the extent of their perversion until the driftwood queen quite literally delivered Ramsay’s lackluster penis to her on a platter.

He deserved a taste of his own medicine, Sansa told herself, said again as Ramsay stumbled over the brush. He deserved it, he deserved it, he deserved it and so much more than his two days in the dungeons. And the gods knew she wanted nothing more than to toss chunks of his flesh at his hounds like she were feeding them leftover scraps from the dinner roast.

Despite her vengeful wants, staring down at the instrument he used to brutalize her, she ordered a full stop to his torture before the skinning began. Compromised of a way to speak and a way to receive any pleasure, burning him alive would have to make up for every way he burned her.

(But she still could feed his hounds, she reasoned. They hadn’t yet disposed of the mongrels.)

Two men bound Ramsay to the overgrown X, yanking on the ropes so tightly he grimaced, slumping. Jon strode forward, stood toe to toe with Sansa’s walking corpse of a husband. “For his crimes of theft, torture, patricide, and murder—”

“’uch ’mall infwackon’,” Ramsay snickered.

“I charge you to bring justice to this false lord and all those who shared in his crimes,” Jon bellowed.
“I denounce him and detain him. I strip him of all ranks and titles, of all lands and holdings and sentence him to death.” He faced Ramsay, glowering up at the man. “Have you any last words?”

Once the last tethers were secure, the men descended from the saltire. Accidentally kicked, a hay roll skittered out for formation and the culprit hastened to correct it, leaning it to and then hastening into the audience. He didn’t notice Ramsay watching him, but Sansa did and her eyes narrowed.

Ramsay lolled his head, cracking his neck where Sansa wanted to snap it, where she wanted to jerk it to one side so it fell over limp. He grinned and brokenly brayed, “I’m goin’ ta miss havin’ ‘o much ‘un.”

“Very well, then,” Jon said and reclaimed his spot beside Sansa.

One by one the torches came forward and bowed to the hay, as many people and their stories affixed to each as there were shades in the flames. Sansa expected the audience to pop with the first burst in the fire, expected cheers to erupt like a wave of jubilation levitating off of everyone, but they were mysteriously quiet. She glanced around, took in the long, morose faces surrounding her. It seemed no matter who breathed their last, who lost their head or twitched on a noose, death was not something anyone wished to look upon intimately.

First went the cook, then the kennel master. Ser Kyle was third in line and Theon fourth, and together their combined fire ripped through the ring, exploding at Ramsay’s feet. Flames engulfed his legs, curbed his waist. A saner person would’ve begun to panic, struggling in their restraints, but he did not scream. He did not laugh. His gaze fastened onto Sansa and then she, too, approached his figure burning at the stake. Up close and personal with the reaper who sowed her death, who’d have caused it or encouraged her to take matters into her own hands.

Never once did Sansa think their roles would be reversed like this. She infinitely contemplated how he’d meet his end, feverishly fantasized about so many possibilities every time he threw her aside frozen and impaired, and sometimes they felt tangible, sometimes she believed they were real and she was free and it was over.

But they were daydreams. Nothing more.

Until they were.

Ramsay said her name, for sure Sansa saw his lips move, but the crackling fire glaze drowned him out. After today he’d be obsolete, the world pruned of another antichrist, gone like Joffrey, gone like Aerys II. All she had to do was touch down her torch just like the others, crossing the last Ts and dotting the last Is. And yet, staring up at Ramsay, seeing him emasculated of two things he prized most about himself, seeing panic begin to blossom in his eyes while his bride stared at him, the flames lassoing his waist weren’t working fast enough for her.

Jaw clenched, Sansa struck the torch into his chest. Twisted it and twisted and twisted it until his tunic caught, until the embers sizzled to life and spread. It happened so quickly – the fabric burning away, the flames charring his flesh where a heart should’ve lived, the sudden rage – Sansa almost missed the full magnificent beauty of it all.

The noxious smell wafted off him like he were a rotting slab of meat, but it didn’t halt her resolve. Chucking the torch, kindling the inferno, Sansa rejoined Jon in the audience. She hitched their hands, interlocking their fingers, and watched unflinchingly as the fire razed Ramsay’s body. It climbed his arms, cuffed his neck, lapped at his face, and soon enough his skin was gone, melted down to the blackening bone.
And finally Ramsay Bolton screamed.
if you're lost in this darkness i'll carry your throne

Chapter Summary

When the ground rumbled from underneath the choices were to lock and key oneself somewhere safe or run in the opposite direction. Life or death. Fight or flight.

Jon stood in place, ready to catch the blast and its collateral damage in his hands.

Chapter Notes

Most of you may find this to be a disappointing chapter because it's a transitional episode and it's so short. Apologies if you are, indeed, disappointed.

Ramsay’s screams became howls. And those howls leeched the walls, the corridors, sucked on Jon’s eardrums while he followed Sansa on her rounds through the castle, kept a diligent eye on her from the armory to the kitchen to the Hunter’s Gate she deployed a small hunting party through.

After an hour the howls faded to whimpers. Then to nothing.

The last Bolton met his end crucified in fire and his body, like the flames, burned for two whole days.

From his ashes Winterfell’s restoration commenced.

Men who weren’t recruited to the wolfwood were staffed in pockets around her, sent to repair crumbles of outer curtain or patch the grappled holes in the parapets or engineer palisades in the meantime. The sparse few window dressings were ripped from their rods, stitched together and transformed into clothes and blankets by a henhouse of women who commandeered every vacant space for their workings. The temperature plummeted from one truncated sun arch to the next, well below freezing and frigid enough to siphon the color from anyone who stepped away from the fire for too long. Streams froze over in the night and the wells unfortunately weren’t far behind, broom handles and buckets breaking the ice blooming on the top until the ice was impenetrable. With little other option, the smallfolk crowded buckets packed with snow around their hearths and melted them on the kettle to make water.

By high time Jon corralled the livestock selected for slaughter the butcher had procured his special permission to hire boys – ones who weighed less than their load – to carry pails from the hot spring to his stall by rote.

For the better part of the day the boys waddled back and forth, delighting the butcher in their struggle, bringing a rare smile to the faces of others. At the end of it each boy was paid a day-old loaf and a cut of mutton for their trouble, but that didn’t save their faces from draining long when the butcher sprayed their labor on the ground, the puddles murky, blood filming the tops from curing the
raw meat in its salted warmth.

Three-quarters of the marbled cuts were set aside for Sansa’s feast, taken by a lengthy line of couriers swinging the slabs onto their shoulders and marching into the castle. Tormund mentioned the people’s reaction to Jon later, recounted how their eyes then their bodies followed several paces behind the prime meat until someone intercepted them, usually a guard, sometimes a friend, a family member if they were lucky. The butcher sold off the rest of the meat after feeding the undesirable subcutaneous fat to Ramsay’s non-rehabilitatable hounds (and to Ghost if anyone found him), but so many did not return for the sale.

Extravagant feasts for the royal family weren’t anything new. Hells, Eddard and Catelyn Stark had hosted bigger and more lavish festivities. But nearly obliterated by one squall and another on the horizon, Jon wasn’t surprised the common folk were disheartened. They were hungry and cold, and he and Sansa were new.

They were learning. They were doing the best they could.

It was a delicate arrangement they found themselves in, Jon and Sansa, but they adapted to their new roles quickly.

At least, Sansa did.

Because the general populace – both men and women alike – still preferred to bring their matters to a man over a woman regardless of whether she was actually more qualified, Sansa sped through her hours supervising the house’s goings-on like someone had a sword at her back, all go, go, go, whereas the daily agenda slowed Jon’s to a honey drip.

He watched her harried routine from an endless schedule of forums, watched her blur through every room and skillfully avoid Lord Baelish at every turn (a genius Jon wished she’d impart on him; thus far every time Lord Baelish challenged the protective order on Sansa by inviting her to meals and shopping excursions and on strolls just the two of them he’d been denied by more than one authority, but instead of forswearing his schemes he sat in on every public audience purely out of spite for Jon, consequentially blocking a possible conclave with the other lords). She scurried this way and that, a trail of handmaidens struggling to keep up, and Jon wondered if she knew what was happening outside her doors. Had Brienne or Podrick told her what Tormund told him? Had she wandered outside to see it firsthand as he had, the knowledge not giving him a moment’s rest since it came to him?

Or did going through the motions make her entirely oblivious?

Jon hoped not, but he knew that look. He recognized that frenetic energy because that’d been him once, too, immediately after winning the Lord Commander election, had to do and do and do because it was the only way to keep off the weight of disappointing everyone. Until something or someone snuffed out the candle altogether and there was nothing left in him to so much as move his legs.

Every morning Sansa groaned as she stood on hobbled legs, a hand cupping her forehead and the other hooked on her hip as she readied, steadied herself, waking more sore and always in a new place, her feet the worst, but her knees, her back, her arms, her hands. On her feet from the moment she got out of bed to the moment she crawled back in, even her meals were snuck dashing between one place and the next. It was too much too fast; she was going to run herself into the ground.
He warned her to slow down, to take a break, snagged her a few times to enforce it, pointed at the bruises flowering on her hips and elsewhere from running blindly into things and into people. But Sansa relented, said there was too much to do and too much needing her attention. (His too, by the way.) “And the pain you’re in,” he challenged from the stool he set up beside the tub she bathed in. “I do see you.”

“It feels good,” she countered, hummed into the good ache, the satisfying ache as she slipped down further into the water, careful not to get her hair wet.

It meant she was working, meant she was doing, one ant in the flurry of activity frazzling the castle.

(He wouldn’t profess to it, but Jon despised those bruises, the smudge shaped like a thumbprint on the back of her hand and one like a fist’s graze on the outside of her left knee and the red starburst on her right shoulder. Glaring at them as she dressed and undressed, he heard every smack, felt every collision, didn’t have to press on them to know they hurt.

She covered the bruises with high necks and long sleeves and longer skirts, reckoned if they were out of sight out of mind, but they’d never be out of Jon’s mind. She escaped Ramsay, escaped Littlefinger, and he never wanted to see a single bruise on her body ever again.

Not even by his own hands, clutching onto her so tight doing things they hadn’t yet explored.)

The hunting party returned at the first hint of dusk three nights after their disembarked. Two hauled game behind them on a travois, Sansa directing them to the larder while Jon calculated their service. How many mouths they’d feed for how many days and how many times a day. “It might sustain our population for a sennight,” he reported to Sansa, hushed under his breath, don’t let anyone else hear, don’t give rise to panic.

“A sennight?” Sansa questioned much louder than Jon would’ve liked.

Her eyes followed a pair of lines in the snow to the sledge, to the five bucks sliding off each other and off the skin they tied between the tree branches. They died with their eyes open and leaves between their teeth, but they looked healthy, coats shiny and middles round, not unable to forage and not unsuccessful at it. The one on the bottom, his tongue rolled out and trailing another trench behind him, was the largest of the loot; as the butcher and his two squires were betting men Jon made a note to place a wager that that one weighed near five hundred pounds. The four others were probably closer to two or three hundred pounds; he only hoped it’d be somewhat enough to feed the several hundred mouths they were responsible for.

He said so aloud, called it luck if it happened, and Sansa regarded him tersely, crossing her arms over her chest. “They just towed in five adult stags,” she said acerbically. “It’s enough.”

“Sansa,” Jon sighed, glanced over his shoulders and wished he didn’t have to bring this up, not so out in the open, but someone needed to and maybe she’d take it better if it came from him, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re barely keeping afloat here and I don’t know if five stags are going to help.”

“Of course I’ve noticed.”

As she said it her gaze fell down with the snow, to where it accumulated on the window sills and carpeted under their feet, thickening still and laying its first trap of the season. Except, somewhere in
the midst of their triumph over Bolton, somewhere between bringing the free folk to their stead and bargaining with the lords and rescuing maidens, they had tripped into that trap. They’d tripped right into a food shortage and a drought and freezing temperatures taking souls in the night. No waiting on bated breath about it.

For days Jon needed Sansa – the pale one, the winter baby, born and raised – to see winter for what it truly was, to recognize the destitute it blanketed on them as its true face instead of the embroidered surcoat it wrapped around the unknowing. She’d burrowed in a place he couldn’t reach and even the places he could reach were hardly listened to. To know she might’ve agreed all along and was hiding it to save face…

That’s what she’d been doing, right? Coaxing him to bed last night, Sansa came to the window where he stood and snaked her arms around him, locked her fingers and fit her chin in the crook of his neck, pressed kisses there and called him too serious in his ear. He’d tried to reason with her then, but he felt it when she rolled her eyes, wasn’t at all surprised when she argued back. She said the weather wasn’t a hindrance, not like he predicted, and it hadn’t lodged any obstacles in their path.

But she’d been lying.

Had they truly retreated backwards to not trusting one another?

“I worry about you, Sansa,” Jon intimated. She looked over at him, cocked her head askance and for the first time he noticed faint purple rings shining under her eyes. He hadn’t even realized she wasn’t sleeping. “Ever since we executed Bolton you won’t slow down. You move so fast I don’t think you see anything that’s happening around you.”

“We don’t have enough food. We don’t have enough shelter,” she stated, the hardness in her voice faltering on each round of ‘don’t’. “You have to move twice as fast to fix the things that are wrong.”

Jon shook his head. He wanted to loop his arm around her waist and tuck her in close, shifted around to do so but thought better of crowding her at the last second. “Not by yourself and not all at once.”

“So what is it you propose we do?” she prompted, the edge come back. “Should we delegate some of our duties to focus exclusively on others instead of learning how to balance them all? Should we ask the Mormonts to hunt for us and the Tallhart’s to build our walls and Littlefinger to staff our guard house?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Jon conceded.

“Good,” Sansa snapped, stepping away from him and after the hunters. “Then keep not saying it. We can do this ourselves.”

He didn’t go to her bedchamber that night. He didn’t slip under the covers or kiss her goodnight or envelope her in his arms, didn’t whisper to each other long after they should’ve been asleep or smell her hair last before dreams found him.

Instead, as the heaviest snowfall yet landed on their roofs, he bunked with Tormund in a room across the courtyard from hers and watched her lit window all night, waiting for a glimpse of her. And he got a few, just a few, she lazing her head on the stone frame or peering down into the ward, searching for him in one place or another, and in those appearances he ached to go home to her as desperately as he wanted to confide his dilemma in Tormund. But Sansa couldn’t stand the sight of him and would toss him back out, and he already knew what his friend would say: he’d grouch that
Jon was being a bloody ninny and that women didn’t always mean for a man to stay away when she told him to go away.

Maybe that was true. Or maybe it wasn’t. Jon didn’t have the courage to find out which.

Sansa gave up waiting for him well after sleep subdued the castle, extinguished her candles and doused the light from her room, and only then did Jon leave his vigil as well. He curled into a ball on his pallet, back to Tormund’s rattling snores, then twisted and turned fitfully the rest of the night.

It was their first fight as a couple. Their first true fight.

The next morning, when Sansa declined his invitation to break their fast together without ever looking at him, he decided he never wanted to go to bed cold again.

Four days after the repairs began the construction depleted the stone supply with more still to go.

It was a setback, the worst kind at the worst time and one Sansa hesitated to remedy despite the need for its immediacy and volunteers persisting they make the journey. The terrain was far too treacherous to risk anyone just to import more stones, she decreed without room for persuasion, and they hadn’t the coin either.

She gnawed on her bottom lip and pulled on her hair and funneled her eyes steadily to the sky in the brief moment of pause, and then did Jon realized the tectonic plates of her were shifting. On the brink of change. On the brink of imploding.

When the ground rumbled from underneath the choices were to lock and key oneself somewhere safe or run in the opposite direction. Life or death. Fight of flight.

Jon stood in place, ready to catch the blast and its collateral damage in his hands.

“I want to cancel the feast,” Sansa announced from her sojourn atop the battlements where Jon found her.

She stood back from the merlons, the tops of winter town’s swollen market shops and residences barely visible from her vantage, mere chips between the crenels. If she tipped over, spying on the lanes below, she’d see as Jon did that the hay and clapboard roofs were caving in in places and smashed clear through in others, leaving them pregnable to outside affronts. Like everything else in their gray waste, Jon noted with dismay, if the Night King didn’t trespass into their territory and demolish the hamlet first then the temperatures would surely make ghosts out of them.

“Are you certain?” Jon questioned, though he knew she was because she wouldn’t have said it otherwise and he knew why because the unmistakable whine as the smallfolk pushed on the gates reinforced her conclusion. “I thought the feast was why you sent the hunters out in the first place.”

“It was,” Sansa affirmed, locking and unlocking her knotted fingers.

She didn’t elaborate, didn’t even make room for it. Unlocked her fingers. Locked them. Unlocked them again. The cold stung Jon’s eyes and as she mashed her lips together he noticed tears glistening in Sansa’s. She’d also blame them on the cold if he brought it up, would press the back of her hand
to the roses in her cheeks, flash him a wilted smile and say it was the wind. Just the wind. No more, no less. Nothing to concern himself with.

Another lie to add to the pile.

Or was it a fib? The kind of prevarication that served the greater good. The kind all leaders did on occasion if it meant protecting their people from the hysteria the truth often gave rise to. The kind that kept hope breathing when it was the only oxygen giving them life.

Jon wondered if he could do that when the time came. They were theoretically trained for this, for these duties and responsibilities come with being a lord’s offspring, but the harsh reality of their new lives harnessed an unexpected weight neither he nor Sansa came close to anticipating. Even though he had the exact same lessons, mornings spent scribbling swords that crosshatched his notes and giving a smile when Robb muttered something under his breath, as a bastard Jon knew better than to believe he’d ever have the same privileges as his trueborn siblings. Those duties fell on the daughters and the responsibilities on the sons, but never on him.

(But if he was a prince – a silver prince, a dragon prince – where did that leave him now?)

An aspiring princess from the day she first talked, Sansa’s onus dictated she went from her father’s daughter to her husband’s wife to her children’s mother and a lady all at the same time. Though it was perfectly human for pressure to crush such things into effect, she’d never admit to feeling overwhelmed or inadequate.

Not even to Jon.

…Maybe.

He nudged her, cagily encouraged, “Sansa, talk to me. Please.”

“You were right,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Jon’s brows pulled. “About?”

“The majority of the armies were sent home as you predicted they would be, but their lords are still here and a couple hundred of their men each and…” Sansa exhaled slowly. “This winter doesn’t feel like the others, Jon. This is the winter of our house. This is the winter Father spoke of, the winter his father spoke of and his father before him. The snow is killing all our vegetation. Most of the wildlife is either dead or in hibernation. The wells are freezing, and we can’t keep fires burning long enough to be of any use. Half the people here won’t survive through to the next summer.”

“We’ll save who we can,” Jon said, looked down on the lanes and wondered just how many people she was right about. How many of the shops would be without their owners and the houses their occupants. They were grim things to think about, things he wished he didn’t have to consider. “But, yes, we should expect some fatalities.”

“But… We’re responsible for all of these people, Jon. Every one of them who travels to Winterfell and winter town.”

His shoulders slumped. “I know.”

Sansa gnawed on her bottom lip. Plumped it red and cut into the cracks webbing its curves. “They’re looking to us, but what can we do that’s any different than what they can do for themselves? We can’t even rebuild our defenses,” she lamented, closing her eyes and tipping her head back. Under happier circumstances she would have stuck her tongue out to catch snowflakes. “Look how
gluttonous and selfish we are, parading meat through the streets for an unnecessary feast while our people barely have enough to feed themselves. Our opulence is shameful.”

“Then we host a smaller feast,” Jon suggested instead. “The lords will understand the need to ration. Winter’s come and when it stretches south and reaches their lands they’ll have to budget the exact same. You wanted this feast to honor Rickon and Davos after their funerals—”

“Yes, and when are those happening?”

What holes remained throughout the castle were bandaged with timber picked off the funeral pyres lying in wait for Rickon and Davos. The initial plan was to use Bolton’s execution fire to feed their pyres, to carry a torch from one to the other, but for three days the biers curdled in the main courtyard, desuetude and generally unguarded.

Their neglect was the catalyst for poaching of the pyres.

The thieves were sneaky at first, darting out under the cover of night for a branch or two to kindle their fire, so when a twig went missing no one noticed. But soon the lack of reproach emboldened the foraging, encouraging it to grow wild and free and brazen. Crossing the yard to find lunch yesterday Jon stopped to observe a small girl plucking a bouquet of twigs from the brush and then skipping off as though she had picked flowers instead of dead wood, and he hadn’t so much as slapped her wrist for it. Then, the very same day, on his way to Tormund’s solar, he tracked a chorus of cackling and witnessed three men poke a bole from the center of one of the pyres and cart it off into the night.

It was done for a good cause, Jon knew, and had those same men come to him with the entreaty he would’ve done the same, but it was the open defiance that was the problem. One of lesser importance, yes, but one all the same.

The people shouldn’t want to steal from a site intended as tribute to one of their lost sons.

Hells, they shouldn’t need to.

Seemingly reading his mind, Sansa speculated, “The longer we leave the pyres there the more people will steal from them.”

She was right. It was Jon’s own reluctance that had stalled the rites, rescheduling it and rescheduling it, not ready to let go of his youngest brother (for his memories would always regard Rickon and Bran and Arya and Robb as his siblings even after he repositioned every family member he ever knew or knew of) and the man who was a teacher to him as much as Eddard Stark or Jeor Mormont were. Rickon was still too young and Davos too good, and he’d miss them both immeasurably.

“Then maybe we shouldn’t use them,” he said. “Maybe we should give the wood to our people. You and I have both known cold like what they’re feeling and repurposing wood for pyres seems like a waste when there are ulterior needs for it.”

“What do we do with the bodies?” The ones waiting as long for Jon’s green light, shrouded in bedsheets in the maester’s turret. “You said cremating is the only way to ensure they won’t reanimate as wights.”

“Davos and Rickon were killed by a monster, but not one that follows the Night King,” Jon assured her. “Interment has been our burial rite since the First Men. Maybe it was never our right to change the old customs. I know we can’t commission a sculpture for his grave at the moment, but I think we should still entomb Rickon in the crypts with the rest of the family.” He smiled a little. “Do you
remember how much he loved exploring the tunnels with Shaggydog?”

Sansa smiled too, wrapping her arms around herself. He didn’t know if she knew Rickon had an explorer in him, that title so often tagged to Bran and his feet he floated constantly off the ground, nor did he know what her last image of Rickon was, but Jon hoped it was a good last image. He hoped she at least had that, hoped she could at least watch him fondly as she said goodbye.

“I like the idea of him joining the crypts,” Sansa said. “But what about Ser Davos? He wasn’t family by blood.”

“If it were spring we could dig him a grave somewhere nice. Like atop a hillock. But the ground’s too hard for that now,” Jon scrutinized.

“What if we found a plot under a tree? Can we build him a cairn?”

He nodded, seconded, “We can build him a cairn.”

Murmuring an “Okay,” Sansa closed the few paces between them, walking into Jon’s arms and planting her head on his shoulder. Her fingers crept under his cloak, tangling in his tunic’s laces, and for a moment she stared down the battlement, past the bastion and over the frozen treetops, chewing on her lip, lost in thoughts she twice opened her mouth to bring forth but let go of with a whimper. Nesting her face in his fur collar, she whispered, “I’m sorry I was so awful to you yesterday.”

Her breath puffing warmth on his neck, her lips leaving scorch marks, Jon squeezed her, encamping his hands comfortably on the small of her back. “It’s alright,” he whispered back.

“It’s not alright,” Sansa objected. “You don’t deserve for me to take my insecurities out on you.”

Jon tightened his grip, bunching her cloak at her waist. “Sansa, we’re managing. We’re okay. You’re okay.”

She groaned pitifully, shifted in his comfort to tuck her arms between their chests and her face under his chin, cratering slightly in the knees for the angle. Jon waited for her to explain further, but she stayed shuttered, choosing silence over talking to him about whatever was going on inside her head. He didn’t want to be perturbed by her, wasn’t her fault for feeling what she felt, but he couldn’t quell the spike of annoyance that flared up in his gut.

How could they run a kingdom competently if they wouldn’t communicate with one another? How could they have a relationship and have a family if they wouldn’t communicate with one another? The futures Jon had implanted in his mind were doomed if both or either were too nervous or too scared to talk. Hell, to even ask what was wrong.

He wanted to go back to days ago, to the morning after the battle and that bed and that halcyon moment where they were uninhibited and bare to be if for a couple hours. He wanted to go back knowing everything that’d happen in the coming days, the sore spots and the splendid, and tell Sansa to please not go as cold on the inside as it was outside, to please trust him and talk to him and realize he wasn’t going anywhere she wasn’t. That he meant every word of his declaration and most vehemently the part about being partners in everything life threw at them from this day on.

Did she hear him when he said it? Did she need to heart it again? How many times? He’d talk himself hoarse if he had to.

“No. You know what. I take back what I said,” Jon said, looked down his nose to Sansa looking at him through her eyelashes. Her eyes were so big when she did that, wide and like a marble swirling an ocean’s worth of turbulent waters, and Jon kissed the slope between them, pecked the ring under
one and all the way to her ear, kissed the shell and thought for a second he’d never kissed someone so much in his whole life and discretion be damned. He gushed softly, “You’re doing very well. I know you won’t believe me, but you’re so much better at all of this than you think you are.”

He’d hoped she’d cave. Hoped she’d talk. She barely cratered. “I just…”

Sansa inhaled deeply, holding onto those words, the dam erected so thick nothing punctured through to the other side. Tilting his head, Jon prompted, “What?”

“I want to be as good at this as my mother was, and I’m not. I’m nowhere close,” she bemoaned, squeezing her eyes shut. “And I know that’s a stupid thing for me to think about right now—”

“It’s not stupid. Nothing you ever think or feel or want is stupid,” Jon reminded her. “As for Lady Catelyn, she wasn’t perfect and no one’s expecting you to be either. Least of all me.” Sansa sniffled. “You’ve never had so many people relying on you before and you need to give yourself room to adjust.”

“I’ve never had anyone rely on me,” she corrected, slinging a finger across her cheek. She rubbed her face in his neck and set her sights on the sun as a cloud scudded across its luminance, squinting against it. Muffled in his cloak, she requested, “Come to our room tonight.”

“Of course,” Jon responded, then added quietly in case the wind nabbed their secret right out from under them, “I miss you.”

As she lifted her head and volleyed the sentiment back, the conviction of it tightening in her throat and spilling out as a croak, the wind whipped a frenzy around them. Swept the powdery snow up into the air and spun it, whirled it into a tornado. Jon held tighter onto Sansa, pressed kisses to her forehead and deposited them in her hair and wished he could steal a kiss from her lips if only they weren’t so public, if only they were back in that room, because a lack of discretion would damn them infernally. She leaned into him then and he hoped the tornado never let them out of its cocoon. Hoped they could stay there a few minutes longer, no one looking for them, no one jockeying for their attention.

Except, he should’ve known better than to say such things. He should’ve touched wood or tossed salt over his shoulder after the fact. Because a sharp cry sliced through the wind and the tornado deflated on contact, showering Jon and Sansa in its drift. They hunched their shoulders instinctively and when it had all fallen at their feet they both giggled, faces cracking, sunlight reignited in Sansa’s smile and eyes and if that wasn’t the holiest, most beautiful thing Jon had seen in days he didn’t know what else was in contention.

She dusted the snow from his beard and he jiggled it from her long waves, and they were so on top of the world neither noticed winter town’s discordance had ceased until another shout yanked them out of their spell. Below them the market parted to the sides, making passage for an empty wagon creaking and jostling towards Winterfell’s gates. The two occupants riding on the front seat were pitched this way and that by the uneven turf, the man to the left – the paying passenger, by the looks of him – gripping the seat rails hard enough his veins popped under his skin. Jon saw why the death grip: to say the cart was dilapidated was being kind, its bed boards splintering and the bolts rusted and a spoke on the front driver’s wheel missing so sizable a chunk it astonished Jon the wheel hadn’t come off its hub.

The coachman, his drenched shirtfront stretching over a significantly rotund belly, barked at a pair of boys who ran across the road in front of his horse, letting off a string of expletives Sansa winced at. He snapped the reins, audibly smacking the loin strap. The draft horse threw up its head, snorted, and pulled forward.
Jon grimaced as they wound into the uphill curve, too slowly but not cautiously, didn’t see the numerous potholes and ruts under the snowdrifts until it was too late. A guard hailed the duo, abruptly halting their approach, and in that second one of the back wheels sank in a groove. Coachman and passenger lurched to the side, and as he spilled over the passenger’s hood slipped off, revealing a bulbous bald head.

He clamored from the cart at once, leaping off the mounting step and nearly losing his balance in the snow up to his ankles. The coachman made an awful commotion, first at his passenger for deserting then at his horse for getting mired, flapping the reins brutally. When the cart would not budge and his passenger not return, he stood up in his seat and like a sledgehammer pounded the hamlet with his misfortune. Spectating the scene unfold from his perch, Jon had little doubt the man was sloshed, drinking mead for his meals and a lot of it to satisfy his gurgling belly.

But his braying paid off; guards and smallfolk alike rushed to his aid, one steadying the alarmed horse as several others surrounded the cart’s back end, lifting on three once, then twice. They managed to edge the cart forward, but the second they straightened and let go it rolled back down the incline, sticking yet again. A collective groan chorused through the group.

Their attention elsewhere, the guards had abandoned their post and left Winterfell’s gate unmanned, and the shrouded man gained admittance without anyone so much as batting an eye. Jon snorted, set a hand on the merlon and leaned farther over to espy the man’s face – to unsuccessfully espy the man’s face. “Who is that?” he wondered aloud. “Sansa, did you see – Sansa?”

Her brows hunched and her lips parted, Sansa had picked up her skirt and launched down the battlements, mindful to keep her grace intact as she slowly descended the stairs on her tiptoes. Hastening after her, his tracks indented next to hers, Jon held his breath that she didn’t slip on the icy steps, but she stayed sure-footed, touching down just as the wagon trundled into the courtyard.

Guards flowed in behind the wagon. Including Stuart who, upon spotting the man, veered towards him, the sword tied to his belt thumping against his leg as he picked up his pace to a jog. “Excuse me, sir,” he called, skidding to a stop, spraying snow dust on the back of the man’s legs, “as I told you at the gate, I need to speak with Lady Stark and Lord Commander Snow before allowing you inside.”

Sansa held up her hand, testified, “It’s alright, Stuart. I know this man.” She waited for Jon to align himself beside her and for Stuart to resign his messaging and shuffle along to his post to turn her eyes coldly on their visitor. “Lord Varys. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

End Notes

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