Build a Ladder to the Stars

by vixleonard

Summary

Jon abandons the Night's Watch to join Robb's cause. After rescuing Sansa from King's Landing, he and Sansa find themselves in a relationship they never saw coming.

Notes

Based on a prompt from Jal80 who wanted a fic where Jon joins Robb and rescues Sansa. Characters are aged up, timelines mean nothing, just go with it.

Title comes from "Forever Young" by Bob Dylan.

For a brief moment as he strides into Robb’s tent, Jon fears his brother will turn him away or, worse, take his head for deserting. The punishment for abandoning the Wall is death; Jon has seen countless men’s heads roll across the grass and snow, cleanly removed by Ice’s blade. That is the sentence any other man would receive; it is the sentence he should receive.

And yet when Robb pauses mid-sentence, his blue eyes going wide for a moment before striding towards him, embracing Jon tightly enough to steal his breath, Jon recognizes there may be some benefits to being the brother of the King in the North.

Lady Stark does not approve, but it is not as if Jon expected her to be welcoming. She speaks of
honor and laws and how he should be sent back to Commander Mormont, but instead Robb sends a
hundred able-bodied men, more than enough payment for a single Northern bastard. Jon feels
ashamed for his actions and thinks of his brothers in black, especially Sam; when the war is over, Jon
decides, he will ask Robb if he can bring Sam to Winterfell as well. He writes a shamed letter of
apology to Sam and Commander Mormont, but he hears nothing back. The Night’s Watch takes no
part, and Jon is a part now.

“Stark and Snow, together again,” one of the Winterfell men drawl one evening after a battle. They
are both slick with sweat, absolutely filthy, and their wolves’ muzzles are saturated with blood. Jon
hears the whispers about them, the fierce brothers who are part-wolf who tear Lannisters apart, and it
baffles Jon. He does not feel like a warrior, a soldier, his brother’s second-in-command; he is still just
Jon Snow, Ned Stark’s bastard, and as much as the North is in his blood, he is even less sure of his
place now that his father is dead.

“I could legitimize you,” Robb offers one frigid morning as the sun is just starting to peek over the
trees, their breaths visible with each exhalation. “You’ve more than earned the Stark name.”

Though it is meant in kindness, the offer infuriates Jon. He should not have to earn the Stark name.
His father’s parting words had been the reinforcement that his blood was as Stark as his siblings’; if a
child’s surname came from their father, why did it matter that his mother was not Lady Stark?

It is stupid pride that makes him decline the offer, and from the way Robb’s body softens in relief,
Jon knows his acceptance would only have made things more difficult for Robb. Lady Stark already
eyed him uneasily, as if he was plotting to steal the crown off of Robb’s head. There is no need to
convince her of it further.

He is older than Robb. Six moons separate them. If he was truly a Stark, Jon would be king and
Robb would serve him.

Jon tries very hard to forget that.

They capture the Kingslayer.

He doesn’t look so pompous and grand as he did at Winterfell, but his lips still twist into that
damnable smirk. Even filthy and bloody, Ser Jaime Lannister does not look like a dangerous man,
and Jon finds it hard to believe he once killed the king. But then, he supposes, not all evil men look
like monsters. And Jon does not doubt the Lannisters are monsters. Even Tyrion, whom Jon came to
like during his time on the Wall, is not without sin; his alliance with his family is enough to make him
Jon’s enemy now.

They convene at Riverrun, the Kingslayer in the dungeon. Jon stands quietly near a window,
watching the servants and men milling around outside. He tries to be as unobtrusive as possible
during these councils; he knows little about warfare and even less about the South. Let the Tullys
and Northern lords who have done this before advise Robb; Jon will brandish Longclaw when
necessary and do what he can to get justice for what has been done to his family.

“We must trade the Kingslayer for the girls,” Lady Stark says, and Jon finally looks towards the
table. He has spent so much of his life doing his best to avoid looking at Lady Stark for fear it will
offend her, but he stares openly now. She looks exhausted, her skin pale, hair hanging limply over
her shoulders. Though Jon didn’t think it possible, she looks even worse than she did after Bran’s
fall.

“If Lord Tywin had Father arrested because Tyrion was in danger, he will be even more anxious to
“See Ser Jaime returned in one piece,” Robb points out. “We cannot squander it.”

“Squander?” Lady Stark echoes before something dark and sad settles over her face. “Oh, I see. Girls are not important enough.”

Shame flushes Robb’s cheeks but he does not argue. For a moment Jon thinks he is misunderstanding what is happening, and when he realizes he isn’t, the frustration and anger of the past year burns sharply in his chest.

“You’d leave our sisters with them, with Joffrey?”

“Jon – “

“They’re our sisters. We cannot leave them in that cesspool! You have to trade – “

“All of the North is at stake! I cannot decide what is best for a few when I have thousands of people to consider.”

“The few? It’s Sansa! It’s Arya! If you leave them there, who knows what will happen to them? How soon until Joffrey decides to take their heads? How soon until he decides to follow through on their betrothal?”

Robb flinches. “Of course I don’t want that. But if we give the Kingslayer back so easily, we have nothing to bargain with. I must think like a king – “

“Our uncle died to save his sister from a mad prince. Our father struck down the greatest knight in the land for her. You will not even treat with Lord Tywin and see if he will – “

“I will not hear more of this!” Robb interrupts, face so flushed it matches his hair.

Jon hears nothing after that. When he leaves the room, he heads straight for the kitchens, filling a pack with bread, dried meat, and several skins of wine. If he could reach Riverrun from the Wall, traveling to King’s Landing should be no problem. No one in the South knows him, and Ghost is the only way to identify him without a doubt. If he stays off the Kingsroad, it is doable enough.

He rides hard for the capitol, making the trip in less than a week. By the time he reaches Flea Bottom, he is filthy and exhausted; as he purchases more supplies for the journey back to the Riverlands, he begins to hunt for the best way to enter the palace.

It is pure happenstance he arrives two days before Princess Myrcella is set to depart for Dorne by barge. He wears his black cloak, keeping the hood up to hide his face, sticking close to the crowd. In the distance he can see the bright banner of Sansa’s hair as she stands among the royal family, little Tommen sniveling near her. Jon strains to see Arya but finds no hint of his youngest sister, and it makes him start to panic. He cannot leave King’s Landing without both of his sisters, and he can especially not leave without Arya.

He follows close as they start to depart, and what happens next occurs so quickly, he isn’t even sure how it starts. One minute he sees Sansa riding placidly on her horse, her eyes downcast, and the next the crowd is rioting, pulling apart the High Septon, grabbing for every member of the royal family as the Kingsguard tries to keep them at bay. Jon sees Sansa tumble from the saddle, taking off down an alley as a group of men follow, and Jon does not hesitate to give chase

Four large men surround his sister, one atop her and keeping her pinned to the filthy stable floor. Jon unsheathes his sword in one graceful motion, skewering one before pivoting to strike down another. A warm spray of blood hits his face, but Jon does not stop moving until none of the men stand.
Sansa has crawled backwards in fear, and Jon sees her gown and shift are destroyed, her corset visible. Her hair is a mess, straw clinging to the auburn locks, and her entire body is shaking; there are bruises on nearly every inch of visible skin, many of the marks starting to yellow, and Jon feels nauseous as he realizes just what has been happening to Sansa inside the Red Keep.

“Sansa.”

Her blue eyes are wide as she takes him in before shakily breathing his name. Jon smiles despite the circumstances, quickly helping her to her feet. Sansa tries to hold together the scraps of her gown, and Jon quickly removes his cloak, wrapping it tightly around her and using the hood to hide her bright hair.

“Where is Arya?”

Sansa shakes her head. “I have not seen her since before Father was killed. I don’t even know if she’s alive. They lost her. I think she ran away.”

Jon wants to curse, scream, rage against the Lannisters and burn King’s Landing to the ground, but now is not the time. He hurries Sansa from the stables, certain the Kingsguard will come to find her soon, and they must reach his horse and Ghost as soon as possible. Sansa stumble several times, frequently looking behind her, and as they enter the Flea Bottom alley where he left his horse, Sansa nearly collapses as Ghost comes into view.

“I want to go home,” Sansa murmurs as Jon helps her up onto the horse, and she sounds so young, Jon wishes he knew how to handle her. If she was Arya, he wouldn’t hesitate to embrace her or ruffle her hair or do any countless things; Sansa has always been an unknown quantity to him, a girl he loves because she is his sister but does not know at all.

“We’re going home,” he promises as he spurs the horse forward, Ghost running to keep pace.

They are only two days from King’s Landing when their horse throws a shoe in the middle of nowhere. With no other option, Jon leads the horse towards the nearest village, Sansa stumbling on alongside him. Still she wears his soiled cloak, shivering as the cold winds pick up, and when they reach the nearest village, he finds he only has enough gold for either the blacksmith or a room at the inn.

“I can work for you,” Jon assures the blacksmith. He feels as if he might collapse, but he will carry every hammer and piece of iron in the shop if it means he will be able to get Sansa to Riverrun.

“There’s a war on, boy,” the old man grunts, “and I don’t have time for charity.”

Jon opens his mouth to further argue his point when Sansa moves forward, dropping something onto the table. It is one of those things ladies wear in their hair, crafted from silver and inlaid with rubies; Jon is willing to wager that Sansa’s hairpin is worth more than anything he has ever owned. The smith picks it up, examining it carefully, before looking at the two of them speculatively. After a moment he nods, tucking the jewel into his pocket.

“The horse will be ready tomorrow.”

Their remaining gold buys them a single night in an inn of questionable repute. Jon watches in amusement as Sansa tentatively touches the straw mattress; even as a prisoner, he’s certain she has only known featherbeds. But she does not voice a word of complaint, and that alone would’ve been enough to convince him the Sansa he last glimpsed in Winterfell is not the Sansa he’s with now.

“When we reach Riverrun, I may stay in the bath for a fortnight,” she says, carefully removing her
shoes and stockings, neatly lining them up beside the bed.

Jon smiles and moves to fill the basin they are provided with water to warm. They may not be able to afford a tub, but they can, at least, wash some of the grime from their skin. “I will do the same and eat an entire roast pig myself.”

When the water has warmed over the fire, Jon carries it to the bedside table with the thin rag. Sansa hesitates only for a moment before shedding her ruined dress, leaving her in half of a ruined shift and her corset. For a terrible minute, Jon cannot look away. It is not the healing bruises or bits of scar tissue that keep his attention this time; it is the long, graceful line of Sansa’s necks, the surprising swell of her breasts over the top of the corset. She has a woman’s body now, and the knowledge unsettles Jon almost as much as the pull he feels towards her in the firelight. He averts his gaze as Sansa begins to wash her arms, cursing himself as the worst sort of deviant.

“I have a spare change of clothing if you’d like it.”

“You’d have me wear men’s clothes?”

“It may be safer as we travel further into the Riverlands.”

He does not specify the dangers, but he does not need to as Sansa admits, “I have heard rumors of what is being done there. It makes me hope that when Arya ran away, she made it to the Stormlands or Dorne.”

“You think she’s alive?”

Sansa is quiet for several beats and Jon steals a glance towards her. The spill of auburn hair over her shoulder to cover one breast makes him want to lean forward and brush it back. Finally she says, “I do. For all her troublemaking, she was smart. I don’t believe they’d catch her. Mayhaps she’s somewhere safe right now just like we are.”

“We aren’t safe yet, Sansa.”

“So long as I am somewhere the Kingsguard cannot reach me and Joffrey cannot punish me, I am safe.” She meets his gaze and smiles weakly. “I would like those clothes if you can spare them.”

He gives her his back as she removes her ruined clothing and dons his. She looks odd in his trousers and tunic, but the garments do nothing to deemphasize the curves of her body. Jon hates himself for even noticing. He blames the past year spent in only the company of men; it has made him even less equipped to be around beautiful ladies than he was before.

As Sansa settles into the bed, tugging the rough blanket up around her chin, Jon quickly cleans himself up in the basin. He moves to lie down on the floor when Sansa calls his name, patting the bed for him to join her. When he resists, he catches a glimpse of the Sansa he had known. She rolls her eyes and makes a noise in her throat that says he is an idiot, a belief she voices as she declares that he needs rest more than she does and she will not allow him to sleep on the floor. Jon hesitates only for a moment before succumbing; he has not slept in a real bed since leaving Riverrun, and even a thin, straw mattress is better than an unforgiving floor.

The warmth of her body beneath the blanket startles him. After months on the Wall, he had thought he might never be warm again, and the warmth of Sansa’s body is different than anything else he’s experienced. Jon cannot even explain how it is true, but as she shifts to get comfortable, he realizes this is the first time he has shared a bed with a girl since Arya used to sneak into his bed to sleep when she was still Rickon’s age. Never once has a grown woman been so near him, and Jon cannot
believe Sansa is not a child any longer. He is nine-and-ten now, which makes Sansa just shy of sixteen; childhood is gone now.

“Thank you,” Sansa whispers in the darkness, turning on her side to face him.

“You do not need to thank me, Sansa.”

“No, I do. You came when no one else did.” Her voice trembles as she repeats, “No one else did.”

Once again he wishes he knew her better, that he knew how to make her feel better or at least tell an eloquent lie as to why Robb did not come. But of all the things he does know about Sansa, she has never been dumb. If he lies, she will know, and so instead Jon blurts out, “I will always come.”

The brush of Sansa’s fingertips against the back of his hand makes him turn his hand over, catching hers and squeezing it tightly.

When he wakes at dawn, their hands are still entangled.

The Tully and Stark banners flap wildly in the wind above Riverrun. When they first glimpse the leaping trout and running direwolf, Sansa’s grip tightens around his waist and he hears her breathing quicken. Riverrun is no safe haven for him; if there is one place on earth where Ned Stark’s bastard is certainly not welcome, it is the home of his father’s lady wife. But Sansa is half-Tully, and the only parent she has left is inside the castle walls. Jon does not know what it is like to have a mother, but the depth of his grief for his father makes him wish he had another parent. With his father dead and Benjen missing, Jon knows the knowledge is lost; but Sansa still has something and he wants to give that to her.

Robb’s men cast disapproving looks at him as he rides into the yard. He knows how this looks; already the men have been distrustful of him for abandoning the Wall. For him to return to Riverrun with a woman at his back is sure to rally their worst thoughts.

Jon helps her down from the saddle, her legs nearly giving out after riding so long. Sansa grips his shoulders fiercely, and it is only then Jon sees the pure nervousness in her face. They have not spoken much since fleeing King’s Landing, but Jon knows whatever happened there has changed her deeply. He has witnessed the way she flinches from strangers, the fading bruises and dribbles of scar tissue that peak out when his tunic lists off of her shoulder; but it is the way she whimpers and cries out in her sleep that bothers Jon the most. The desire to avenge his father’s murder has been replaced with a need to punish the Lannisters for what they’ve done to Sansa.

“Please don’t leave me,” Sansa whispers, clinging tighter to his jerkin. “Swear it.”

“I swear.”

It is the first time Sansa has ever asked anything of him; it does not even occur to Jon to refuse.

The cry that slips past Lady Stark’s lips when she sees Sansa is equal parts grief and ecstasy. It is the first time Jon has seen Lady Stark run, rushing towards her oldest daughter as if the Stranger is after her. Shame and shock wrestle for dominance on Robb’s face, and he is slower to approach them. Sansa accepts her brother’s embrace with less enthusiasm as her mother’s, and Jon watches.

He always watches.

Lady Stark does not thank him for what he did and Jon does not expect it. Robb thanks him too effusively, his guilt pushing him towards overzealous displays of gratitude. It makes Jon
uncomfortable for a variety of reasons, not the least of which being Jon cannot find a way to divorce himself from the anger and disgust he feels towards Robb for refusing to go with him.

Sansa keeps looking at him over their shoulders, her blue eyes fixed on his. Jon still does not know how best to interact with Sansa, but what he does know is the girl who rode down the Kingsroad with their father is gone just as the boy who went North with Benjen disappeared as well.

Sansa joins him when he breaks his fast, slipping into the chair opposite him. Robb and Lady Stark are locked in one of the upstairs rooms with the Tullys and some of the bannermen discussing their next move. Jon has no interest in joining them and, despite rescuing Sansa from the Lannisters, some of the men look at him as distrustfully as ever. It does not matter that Sansa is with them because of him; all they see is a man who disobeyed his king.

They do not speak at first. Jon continues to eat, his appetite still ravenous after a moon’s turn with insufficient food, and Sansa carefully spreads preserves across a piece of bread. Must like at Winterfell, it does not seem as if she recognizes he is there at all, and the memory of it still stings. Sansa was never cruel; it wasn’t her way. But from the moment Sansa understood what “bastard” meant, her loyalty to Lady Stark did not allow for them to be close. Jon understood it, but it didn’t make it hurt less.

“I’m sorry you came for Arya and only found me,” Sansa says after several minutes, shattering the silence.

So stunned by the assessment of the situation, Jon cannot say a word. When he finally finds his voice, he manages, “I did not only come for Arya.”

“She would have been so happy to see you. She didn’t like it there much. She must have asked Father a hundred times to return home or to see you.” Sansa sets down her silverware, smoothing her hands over her lap. “I told Queen Cersei what Father planned. All I cared about was being queen. I didn’t know…I didn’t know.” She lifts her eyes, and Jon sees tears glistening there. “Do you regret saving me now?”

“No. You didn’t know. How could you?”

Sansa shakily exhales, reaching for a cup of spiced wine. “My mother says you plan to return to the Wall.”

It takes everything within Jon not to scoff at Lady Stark’s assessment of a brief conversation he and Robb had about the future. “Not until after the war, after the North is free.”

“Good.” Sansa offers him a small smile. “Good.”

Ghost seldom leaves her side.

Jon certainly cannot begrudge Sansa the companionship of his wolf; he thinks of Lady with the ribbons on her leash and docile manner, and he hates the Lannisters even more for ordering the direwolf killed. Ghost is a good sport about the pampering Sansa showers upon him; he sits patiently while she combs burs from his coat, allows Sansa’s careful hands to groom him, and eagerly devours the treats Sansa brings him. Soon it is impossible to see Sansa without Ghost padding alongside her, bearing his teeth if someone comes too close and disturbs her.

“She’s scared of my men, especially the Riverlands ones,” Robb confides one afternoon as they return from the godswood.
“They’re knights. She’s told you what the Kingsguard did?”

Robb nods tersely. “What knight beats a defenseless girl? I’d love to rip Joffrey’s head right off of his body.”

Choking back unkind responses, Jon suggests, “Mayhaps you should send her back to Winterfell. Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrik are familiar to her; I’m certain she’d want to see Bran and Rickon. Would your Lady Mother be willing to accompany her?”

“I’m not certain. She misses the boys, that I know, but she doubts my ability to navigate the politics of war. She is desperate for me to make good on my marriage contract so I have an heir. And with Arya missing…I fear there is too much on her shoulders.”

“I would not worry about your mother. She fights a better war than the rest of us.”

Robb chuckles. “That’s true. There are days I am not sure if I want to send to her away or cling to her skirts.”

The only skirts Jon ever had to cling to were Old Nan’s. “I think Sansa would do well if she was safe at home.”

That evening as Jon readies for bed someone begins to bang on his chamber door. He hurries to answer it, certain it can only be Robb reporting something terrible; it could be no one else this late. Instantly Jon begins to imagine the worst: invasions, captures, deaths. The last thing he expects is Sansa, a curious mixture of anger and offense on her face.

“Sansa,” he begins, startled when Sansa pushes past him into the chamber. He does not think Sansa has been in his room since they were children, and Jon wishes she did not linger beside his bed. The tunic he shed lies there; Jon feels the need to apologize for standing there in only his breeches in a way he never would have with Arya.

“You wish to send me away?!”

“What?”

“Robb told me you want to send me back to Winterfell! Do you hate me so much you cannot even stand to look at me here?”

“Of course not! Sansa, no! Robb said the knights bothered you. I thought being home with people you knew, with Bran and Rickon – “

“You swore to me you would not leave me! You swore it, Jon!”

“I wasn’t trying to break that promise! I thought it would make you feel better, Sansa, that is all. I want you to feel safe.”

“I feel safe here with you!” The anger drains from her face, vulnerability replacing it. “I know we have never been close. And I know…I know if not for this war, we likely never would have spoken again. But even knowing all that, you came for me when no one else would. I cannot forget that. I will not forget that. You want me to feel safe? What safer place is there than with the person who cared to come?”

He doesn’t mean to embrace her, not really. It seems the most natural thing to do, and so Jon steps forward pulling her tightly to him. Only when Sansa is against him does Jon realize he has never held a grown woman before, let alone when he is half-dressed. The brush of her breasts against his
chest, the scent of her hair in his nose, the touch of her hands against his bare back, it stirs him in a way so shameful, he feels even worse than a Lannister. But even his shame is not enough to make him pull away, not when Sansa is clinging so sweetly to him.

“We can be friends, can’t we, Jon?” Sansa murmurs against his ear, his traitorous body reacting more than any decent man’s would to his half-sister’s voice.

When he takes himself in hand that night, he wonders if this is how it all began with Queen Cersei and the Kingslayer.

They return to Riverrun after a hard fought battle, filthy, sore, and exhausted. More men than expected were lost, and Jon sees how heavy it weighs on Robb. While usually they discuss the battle as they ride, Robb stays silent. Jon is grateful for it as well; one of the Lannister men split his eyebrow, and blood covers one side of his face. His arms burn from swinging Longclaw, and all Jon wants is to sleep for a fortnight. As the war goes on, sleep has become more and more of a luxury and frequently one they cannot afford.

Sansa arrives at his chamber mere minutes after he does, her face pale with worry. Jon is down to his smallclothes when she enters without knocking, and Sansa hesitates for only a moment before moving towards him with purpose. He reaches for his discarded breeches but Sansa is already dipping a cloth into the basin of water, coming to stand between his splayed knees.

“Sansa – “

“Hush,” she orders, gently beginning to sponge away the dried blood.

He clenches his fists tightly, pushing them into his thighs as he tries to keep control himself. The warmth of Sansa’s body so close is overwhelming; combined with the careful touch of her hands, Jon knows he is not strong enough for this.

“Sansa, please – “

She presses her fingertips to his lips, eyes flaring bright with irritation. “I said hush.”

The sting of the cloth against his split eyebrow provides enough pain to keep his arousal temporarily at bay, but Jon cannot keep from staring at Sansa. No one has ever seen to his injuries except for Maester Luwin, and gods know he never had such a reaction to him. At Winterfell, he never indulged in flirtations with servant girls. While Theon bedded any willing woman and Robb exchanged kisses with a few of the prettier ones, Jon hid away, too afraid to say so much as a word. And none of those girls were even half so pretty as Sansa.

Of course, none of those girls were his sister either.

“You must be more careful,” Sansa states, rinsing the rag before setting about cleaning his eyebrow again. “If his blade was close enough to reach your brow, you’re lucky you weren’t killed.”

“It’s my job to protect Robb.”

“It is your job to return to me.” Jon jerks his head up in surprise and Sansa seems to realize what she just said. “Alive,” she corrects. “It is your job to return alive.”

“Sansa…”

Her lips against his forehead feel like a brand, burning shameful desire into his skin. He feels her
fingers playing with the curls at the nape of his neck, and Jon exhales shakily, his hands drifting upward to rest on the curve of her waist. Petal soft, her lips trail across his forehead, down the bridge of his nose, along the line of his cheekbone, and then hesitate over Jon’s open lips. Time stops for a moment, and Jon knows he needs to pull back and be the man Ned Stark raised him to be.

But as Sansa’s lips meet his, Jon realizes he’s failed to maintain honor in every aspect of his life.

She tastes like spiced wine, her mouth hot and wet. Jon isn’t sure what to do and from the tentative way Sansa touches his shoulder, he suspects she isn’t quite sure either. The knowledge that this is the first true kiss for both of them makes Jon rear up, taking her mouth more firmly, his tongue brushing against the fullness of her bottom lip. Sansa moans softly, stepping closer to him; Jon’s hand slides upward, his thumb brushing the bottom of her breast.

She breathes his name, warm and tremulous, almost a caress, and Jon wants nothing more than to tumble backwards onto the bed with her, to understand all the things he’s heard whispered about by other men. And it is that single thought that wakes Jon up, his hands pushing at Sansa’s hips until she stumbles back a few steps.

“You have to go,” he orders, his voice pained. His cock aches in his smallclothes, and he knows his self-control is dangling by a thread. Another minute and he is not sure if he’ll have the strength to say no.

Dazed and panting, Sansa nods. She hurries from his chamber, the door slamming hard in her wake, and Jon vows then and there he will do everything he can to avoid Sansa.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Jon looks up from polishing Longclaw to see Sansa standing before him, Ghost at her side. The yard is full of men today, loading up supply carts for their upcoming trek to the Westerlands, and Jon looks around anxiously to make sure no one is within hearing distance.

“Sansa – “

“I came to you. I was the one who acted first. You do not get to make yourself the villain and me the victim. I made my own choices, and you do not get to take those from me.”

Jon’s face burns in embarrassment, which has always been his automatic reaction to one of Sansa’s upbraiding. The last he received was for splashing mud on her favorite gown a few moons before the king came to Winterfell. He never imagined he’d receive one like this.

She sinks down beside him, carefully smoothing out her skirts. “I know what I feel for you is wrong. I simply…don’t care right now. Does that make me awful?”

“Of course not.”

“But you…you feel something for me as well, don’t you?”

Jon laughs mirthlessly. “Yes, very much.”

“So then we are in a curious position.” She sighs, reaching a hand out to ruffle Ghost’s ears. “Mayhaps because you are only my half-brother, this is only half of a sin.”

“I’m not sure the gods make that distinction.”
“I’m not sure the gods give a damn what we do.”

Jon isn’t sure anymore either, but there is something infinitely sadder about Sansa’s lack of faith. “None of this is a question of wanting you. But I can’t. Robb…Your mother…I have no wish to ruin you.”

“Ruin me? Did you intend to stand on the walls and shout about what happens between us?”

Jon can’t help but smile. “No, of course I wouldn’t.”

“Then I would hardly be the first woman who lied about going to her marriage bed a maid.” She reaches over, setting her hand atop Jon’s. “If there is anything I’ve learned the past few years, it’s that nothing is certain. Mayhaps none of us will survive this war. Mayhaps I’ll never marry. Mayhaps we’ll burn in all seven hells if we do this.” Her strong expression begins to crumble, tears filling her eyes. “But don’t you tire of being alone, of never having anything to make you feel safe and happy?”

He doesn’t know how to say all he has ever known is loneliness, that the ache of it nearly consumed him a hundred times. Every time he heard one of his siblings call Ned “Father” while he was forced to say “Lord Stark,” every time he watched Lady Stark embrace them, every single instance someone called him “bastard” instead of his name, Jon felt acutely alone. What Sansa is offering is something he never thought to have from anyone, least of all her; to accept it, to slake his thirst with her of all people, it seemed like a confirmation of every horrible accusation hurled at him for being baseborn.

But the fact that a lady like Sansa wants him is something he never dared to dream.

“There you are!” Robb’s voice booms across the yard, making both of them jolt, Sansa withdrawing her hand. Jon steals one final glance at Sansa from the corner of his eye before putting on a smile for his brother and king, hoping his secrets do not show.

“I need to leave a detachment of men here, and Sansa requested you be one of them.”

Jon looks at Robb over his tankard of beer and wills his voice not to waver as he says, “Why me?”

“She wants one of us to be with her, and I cannot stay. I think losing Father and…and Arya, it has made her fearful to lose more of us. If both of us ride into battle together, there is no guarantee both of us will return.”

“So I am to be her guard?”

“Officially, yes. With both her and the Kingslayer here, I know I’d prefer someone I trust watching them. You don’t mind?”

“No, of course not but I imagine your mother will.”

“My mother knows I need my best men serving where I see fit.”

Jon drains his tankard, thoughts racing. “If you think it’s best for me to remain with Sansa, then I’m happy to do it.”

Robb grins, clapping Jon on the shoulder. “I’m so glad you joined me. None of this would’ve been the same without you.”

Jon drinks himself into oblivion.
She comes to him the first night after Robb and his men leave Riverrun, waiting until the full moon is high over the castle. When her soft knock begins against his chamber door, Jon considers keeping the bar in place, hoping his callousness might send her back to her room. But when she whispers his name, Jon cannot stop himself.

Her hair is unbound, spilling over her shoulders, complementing her fine blue dressing gown. For a long moment they simply look at each other, and Jon realizes she’s as nervous as he is. Finally she murmurs, “If you want me to go, I will.”

“I don’t.” Jon flushes with shame as he repeats it, gently brushing Sansa’s hair back over her shoulder. He surprises himself with his own boldness, and Sansa shivers lightly, her body seeming to follow his touch. Encouraged, Jon steps forward, cupping her face and Sansa smiles weakly.

“Have you – Have you ever bedded a woman, Jon?”

He’s certain his face is as red as her hair. “N-No, I’ve never – Not at Winterfell and then I was a brother of the Night’s Watch and –”

Her fingers are soft against his lips. “So you’re a maid too.”

Jon laughs a little breathlessly. “Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Good.” Sansa loops her arms around his neck, resting her forehead against his.

“Will you kiss me now?”

He wishes he’d paid more attention when Theon was rattling on about all the things he did with women because Jon feels woefully out of his depth. As they trip over their feet as they stumble towards the beds, Sansa laughing against his mouth when he falls backward and takes her with him, Jon wishes he knew something beyond the basic mechanics of lying with a woman.

Sansa wriggles free of her dressing gown, pushing it towards the foot of the bed. Jon’s breath catches at the sight of her in nothing but her shift. In the candlelight the material is almost transparent, and he can easily make out the soft curves of her breasts, the stiffening peaks that push up against the gown. He cannot believe someone as beautiful as her wants him, and Jon has never felt desire like this.

It is only when Sansa reaches for him, tugging at his tunic, that reality hits him hard.

“Wait, Sansa, we cannot – I will not get a bastard on you –”

“Then don’t.” she interrupts, twisting her hands into the bottom of his tunic and starting to urge it upwards. “There are ways to stop it. I’ve heard girls whisper about it. It will be fine, Jon, I swear.”

Commonsense tells him they are being careless and rash, but commonsense has no place here.

He sheds his shirt with Sansa’s help, inhaling sharply when Sansa’s hands fall to his chest, exploring his bare skin. Jon struggles to remain still for her, his muscles tightening as her fingers trail down his stomach, sliding through the black hair that grows beneath his navel and disappears into his breeches. When Sansa leans forward, pressing a kiss to his chest, Jon attempts to choke back a moan, and Sansa flicks her blue eyes up to meet his.

“Do you like that?”

“Yes.”
She begins to pepper kisses against his skin, her kisses becoming longer and wetter. Jon touches her hair, struggling not to grab her and hold her tightly against him. His cock aches and when Sansa’s hand brushes against the front of his breeches, Jon’s hips push up on instinct, moaning freely. Sansa blinks in surprise before settling her hand against him and rubbing more firmly.

“Gods, Sansa, stop,” Jon groans, catching her wrists and pulling her in for a kiss. “This will be over too soon if you keep doing that.”

He kisses her passionately, loving the way Sansa seems to melt against him, and Jon knows there is no stopping now. She feels too good and he wants her too much. He asks for permission to remove her shift, both of them panting, and Sansa nods, helping him pull the gown over her head. Jon’s eyes immediately fall to her breasts, and Sansa softly laughs, carding her fingers through his hair and declaring that no one has ever looked at her the way he is.

“Like the Maiden come to life,” Sansa says, but Jon doesn’t know the New Gods. All he knows is there cannot be a more beautiful woman in Westeros than Sansa.

He has only seen a naked woman once. For Robb’s name day one year, Theon dragged them to the whorehouse in Wintertown and paid a woman called Ros a copper to take off her dress. Jon doesn’t remember much about it; the stronger memory was their lord father’s anger when he found out his eldest sons were at the whorehouse. As Sansa shimmies out of her smallclothes, revealing the triangle of auburn hair covering her mound, Jon struggles not to think of his father and the anger he would have had for this.

Jon sheds his breeches and smallclothes, settling beside her. He can feel Sansa’s nervousness increasing alongside his own, and Jon knows the gravity of what they are about to do is sinking in for them. As he glides his hands over her soft skin, his thumb running over the point of her nipple, Jon whispers, “Are you certain?”

“Yes. I choose this. I choose you.”

He isn’t certain how much Sansa actually cares for him, but from the determination in her voice, the resoluteness, Jon knows there is some reason Sansa is insisting upon this. Whatever happened in King’s Landing has changed her, and Jon wishes she’d speak of it.

She must sense his hesitation for she assures him, “You are not taking advantage of me, Jon. This is what I want.”

She does not cry out when he enters her even though Jon can see the discomfort on her face. Jon freezes above her, pressing kisses to her face and whispering apologies for hurting her, and he can feel the bite of her nails in his shoulders. He has heard it is painful for ladies when they lose their maidenhead; Theon used to tell the crudest stories about it and the blood that came with it. Jon wishes he could bear the pain for her, but all Jon feels is pleasure. Sansa’s cunt is warm, wet, and tight around him, easily the best thing he has ever felt, and guilt begins to creep in for what he is doing.


It is over quickly. She feels too good around him, and neither quite knows how to make their coupling feel pleasurable for them both. The awkwardness of their movements is nothing like what they expected, and Jon hates the disappointment he glimpses in Sansa’s eyes. As the pleasure begins to peak, Jon pulls out of Sansa’s body, spilling his seed on her pristine sheets. Sansa wraps her arms around him, holding him tightly against her as their breathing regulates.
“I’m sorry,” Jon pants but Sansa clucks her tongue to shush him.

“It will be better next time. We’ll figure it out.”

Jon hates how happy the declaration makes him.

It becomes a routine. Every evening when they are certain the castle is asleep, Sansa steals to his room, sneaking back to hers before the castles rises. Sansa decides early on that he mustn’t come to her chamber; if they are caught, she reasons, it will be harder to lie about why Jon is in her room than it will be to think of a reason she is in his. Jon knows this is true; if Lady Stark ever discovers him even near her daughter’s chamber, Jon will be turned into a eunuch faster than he can blink.

What she said the first night becomes true. They spend their nights learning each other: what makes the other shiver and moan, what they like best, what they want. The night Sansa shows him where to touch between her legs to bring her the greatest pleasure leaves him walking in a fog the next day, the memory of Sansa touching herself to show him the way coming into his head at the most inconvenient times. He learns she likes a rougher touch than he’d have expected, that she loves when he whispers filthy things in her ear, that she prefers to be astride him rather than to be taken on her back. Jon eagerly absorbs it all, loving the way Sansa’s face lights up with pleasure when he touches her the right way, desperate to see it again.

It surprises him, how much Sansa wants to try, the hunger she has for experience. One evening after they’d tired themselves out, both slick with sweat, Jon asked where she’d heard some of these things. Sansa laughed, bright as could be, and said, “Men aren’t the only ones who talk about what happens in bed, Jon.”

He surprises her a moon’s turn into their affair. It is Pyp who told him of the act when they were training, he and Grenn telling tales of the ladies they had known while Jon and Sam listened. Sansa looks at him in confusion when he kisses her kneecap, his lips sliding up the expanse of her thigh, but she does not protest; the amount of trust she puts in him drives Jon to love her more completely, to be the man she has decided he is.

Her cry is high and shocked as Jon licks over her cunt, her hands falling to his head and clutching his hair. The taste of her in his mouth is salty with a hint of sweetness, and Jon moans against her, hooking his hands around her thighs as he applies his mouth to her cunt.Sansa’s voice pleading with him not to stop drives him mad, and Jon doesn’t think anything will ever be burned into his brain more than this.

Jon wraps his lips around the bud at the top of her sex, the place Sansa taught him to touch to make her peak, and he begins to suck it, lashing the bud with his tongue. Sansa shouts his name, body pitching upward, her feet smacking his back as she shakes through her orgasm, moans increasing as Jon quickly brings her to another. She is still trembling when she begs him to stop, swearing she cannot take another moment, and Jon climbs up her body. It surprises him when Sansa cuffs a hand around his neck and pulls him into a kiss, his mouth still smeared with her pleasure. He feels Sansa hook her legs over his hips, one hand sliding between them to find his cock, and Jon eagerly lets her direct him inside her.

He has been in her half-hundred times now, but tonight feels different. Sansa usually closes her eyes, tilts her head back while he moves inside her, but tonight she holds his gaze resolutely, her fingers tangling in his hair, holding his face near hers. Jon pulls her tighter against him, sliding into her slow and deep each time, and Sansa wraps her legs tightly around him as if she is trying to merge with him completely.
“I love you,” Sansa breathes.

The words are unexpected and overwhelm Jon. They are his undoing, his hips snapping as he peaks, the same declaration spilling from his lips. Sansa clings to him, the two holding each other tightly, and Jon knows nothing will ever be the same now.

They have gone too far to ever go back.

Robb returns from the Westerlands with a bride who is decidedly not one of Walder Frey’s daughters, and suddenly there is strife at Riverrun.

Jon likes Jeyne Westerling. She seems sweet and kind, and it is obvious she is in love with his brother. What is more concerning is the way everyone else reacts. The Freys are abandoning the castle, the broken oath too much for them to bear; Lady Stark seems furious at Robb in a way Jon has never seen. He watches this play out and wonders what will happen next.

“My mother paid you a compliment,” Robb tells him that first night back when they share a pint to celebrate his marriage. “At least I think it was one. She thinks if you had been with him instead of Theon, I wouldn’t have married Jeyne.”

“I’m not sure it’s much of compliment for someone to think I’m less of an idiot than Theon.”

“It was impulsive, I know, but to have lain with her and left, what chance would she have had a suitable marriage? And if I had gotten a bastard on her…You know it was the right thing to do, don’t you, Jon?”

Robb has never disappointed anyone before; Jon hates how much his brother’s imperfection pleases him. “It was an honorable thing to do, and Jeyne seems like a lovely woman.”

Robb grins. “Isn’t she? I know you will love her, Jon. It is impossible to dislike her. Mother will see that. Sansa is doing everything she can to make her feel welcome, thank the gods. Things will settle quickly, I’m sure of it.”

“And what of Lord Frey?”

“When we made the marriage contract to cross, I was to marry one of his daughter and Arya one of his sons. I will speak to Lord Frey, offer marriage to Sansa and a promise that their child will be my heir until Jeyne and I have a child. I’ll make Sansa’s husband something important, give him a holdfast. I doubt Lord Frey will protest to such terms.”

Anger begins to churn in Jon’s gut. “Have you even spoken to Sansa about this?”

“She will see the sense in it. Sansa is a Stark; she’ll do her duty.”

“Her duty being to lie beneath some Frey to fix your mess?”

Robb blinks in shock at Jon’s words. “Jon – “

“After all she’s been through, you don’t even consult her about this? It’s cruel, Robb. All she wants is to go home to Winterfell and be safe, and you’d give her to some stranger?”

“I wouldn’t – I wouldn’t force her! How could you think that of me? I’m not a monster, Jon.”

Jon finishes his beer, pushing to his feet. His anger is too fierce to face Robb right now, and he can see the confusion on Robb’s face at his reaction. Jon mumbles something about how he will speak to
him later, and as he stalks up to his chamber, Jon realizes his anger is less directed towards Robb’s and more towards the faceless Frey who might claim Sansa as his bride. He imagines one of Lord Walder’s hideous sons with their ill manners and leering eyes touching her, and Jon feels murderous. Longclaw’s blade will be slick with blood before he ever allows a Frey to touch Sansa.

He is barely inside his chamber when he sees Sansa standing near the window, a cup of wine in her hand. Her hair is unbound, the laces of her gown loosened, and she is barefoot; if Jon did not know better, he would think he had wandered into her chamber.

“Quite a day, hmm?”

“Robb wants to wed you to a Frey to fix this,” Jon blurts out.

Sansa rolls her eyes, taking a sip of her wine as she crosses towards him. She extends the cup and Jon takes a drink, wrinkling his nose at the taste of the Arbor gold inside. “I’m sure he does. Did he also say how he’s considering proposing you as a suitable betrothal option to Lord Frey?”

“I don’t wish to wed a Frey.”

“Nor I.” Sansa drapes her arms around his neck, smiling teasingly. “I suppose we have no choice but to flee to the Free Cities. I hear Braavos is lovely this time of year.”

“This isn’t funny, Sansa.”

Sobering, Sansa agrees, “No, it isn’t, but it will do neither of us any good to get all stirred up tonight. So what I propose is we enjoy tonight and in the morning, I’ll speak to Robb and tell him I will not be marrying a Frey. Unless you’d like to me to go – “

“No!”

“Then kiss me.”

After Sansa has left, Jon lies on the pillow that still smells of her hair and realizes he cannot begrudge Robb his impulsive love, not when what he is doing is so much worse.

It begins to unravel four moons after Robb’s return from the Crag.

Looking back Jon will recognize how careless they had become. No longer did they avoid sharing glances at meals or keeping a careful distance when they walked the grounds. One afternoon they are curled up on a chaise discussing something inconsequential when Jon looks up to see Lady Stark looking at them with suspicious eyes. Soon after Jon notices Lord Brynden and Lord Edmure are also studying them when they are together, those damned Tully eyes judging every move he makes. If Sansa notices, she doesn’t say anything to him, her days spent with Jeyne and her younger sister, her nights spent with him.

“Jeyne told me they’re working most diligently on giving the North an heir,” Sansa informs him one afternoon as they walk in the godswood. The lack of weirwoods makes Jon ache for the North and the canopy of red leaves he has not seen in over a year.

“A king needs an heir.”

“And Robb needs a reason for my mother to forgive him for his rashness.” Sansa hooks her arm through his, cuddling closer to him. “As soon as she has a grandchild in her arms, he will be beloved once again and there will be no more talk of Frey marriages.”
“Thank the gods for that.”

Sansa smirks. “How can you be jealous of some imaginary betrothal?”

“Because the idea of any man touching you makes me want to kill them where they stand.”

“Do you think I have it any easier? You should hear the things the servant girls say about you.” Putting on a passably good Riverlands accent, she swooned, “‘Oh, Lord Snow, such a beautiful bastard. Wouldn’t mind having him to keep me warm during the winter.’”

Jon laughs. “No one says that.”

“They do so! Jeyne’s lady’s maid is the worst. I want to snatch her hair right out of her head when I hear it.”

“War has changed you, my lady,” he teases.

“Oh, do not make me sound as if I am the mad one! She is very pretty. All of the men look at her – “

“Not me,” Jon cuts in. “I see only you.”

Sansa stops walking, turning her face up to him. “You do, don’t you?”

Their kiss is sweetly passionate, the sort exchanged between practiced lovers. Jon walks her backwards until her back meets one of the trees, one of his hands gathering her skirts to steal beneath them. Sansa gasps as his hand slips into her smallclothes, finding where she is already damp with want. Jon nips at her lip as he slides two fingers inside her, his thumb starting to worry her bud.

“You are wicked,” Sansa pants, arching into his touch, squeezing his fingers. “Just…the most wicked man.”

“You love it.”

“I love you,” she counters, gathering him to her. Jon echoes it back to her, his mouth falling to her neck and sucking a bloom against her collarbone. Sansa begins to shake, Jon’s hand working faster to bring her off, when she gasps, “Oh gods!”

The blow hits Jon squarely on the side of the head, sending him hard to the ground and nearly taking Sansa with him. His head is spinning, and he vaguely he hears Sansa shout for someone to stop when a boot catches him squarely in the ribs before fists begin to rain down on him. It takes a moment for Jon to try to pull away and it is only then he sees Robb, a fury unlike any Jon has ever seen on his face.

“Stop, you’re killing him!” Sansa shouts, throwing herself atop him, holding up a hand to keep Robb at bay. It is the smartest thing she could have done; Jon knows Robb would never risk striking her, and he pulls back as Sansa cradles Jon’s head, wiping blood from his eyes.

“How could you do this? How could you – Our sister! Our little sister! How could you – “

“He didn’t do anything to me!”

“I just saw – “

“You saw exactly what I saw when I walked into Jeyne’s solar yesterday!” Sansa practically growls as Jon struggles to sit up. “You have no right to – “
“No right?! Jeyne is my wife and you are his sister - “

“Half-sister!” Sansa corrects and Jon recognizes what a pitiful excuse it has always been, the parsing of their sin.

Robb looks so supremely disillusioned Jon is not even sure what to say. To say it has all been a mistake is a lie; he loves Sansa absolutely and nothing about that feels wrong no matter what their relationship to each other is. But to tell Robb that, to explain just how deeply he feels, it will do no good, not when Robb hates him so much right now.

“How long?”

Jon climbs painfully to his feet, his ribs screaming in protest. “About six moons.”

“Six – “ Robb looks away, his fists clenching at his sides. Jon’s head feels like it is swimming and he sways on his feet. Sansa carefully reaches for him, helping to prop him up, and Robb looks disgusted by the gesture.

“Please try to understand,” Jon implores but it is then he sees beneath Robb’s anger there are tears shimmering in his eyes. Suddenly Jon feels the full weight of what he has done.

He remembers when Sansa was born, how their father took him and Robb aside and stressed the importance of protecting your sisters and how they both vowed to do so. Arya is gone, dead or worse, and Sansa has been failed so many times. This is one more way Robb didn’t protect Sansa, and Jon is the responsible party this time; he is the one who has caused the damage.

“How could you do this?” Robb asks, his voice infinitely sadder now.

Jon has no answer for him. There is no answer.

Robb comes to him that night, his fury having cooled enough to speak rationally. Jon stands when he enters and somehow understands this is not his brother come to call; this is King Robb, and a punishment is about to be meted out.

“I did not tell my mother what you have done. After everything that has happened, it would kill her, not to mention what it would do to Sansa’s reputation. I would like to contain the damage as much as I can.”

“I understand.”

“What you’ve done…I would take your head if you weren’t my brother. If you were any other man who took what was not yours to take, I would make you a eunuch before I took your head.”

“I did not take anything. It was Sansa’s to give.”

Robb looks murderous as he snaps, “Do not speak! I would send you back to the Wall but after I sacrificed 100 good men for you, it would raise too many questions. You are going to Bear Island and you will help them guard against the Ironborn.”

“For how long?”

“Until the war is over and then you will go anywhere that is not Winterfell. And I swear to the Old Gods and New, if I ever find you near our sister again, whatever love I had for you will not be enough to save you. Do you understand me?”
“Yes, I understand.”

“Good. Gather your things. You leave now.”

“Now? It is the middle of the night. Surely we cannot set sail – “

“Jorelle and Lyra Mormont are riding with some of their men to the Saltpans to set sail. You will begin tonight so you can be there by morning.” As if he could sense Jon’s hesitation, he states, “And, no, you will not be saying goodbye to Sansa.”

“Robb, please – “

“You leave in an hour.”

As he rides from Riverrun, Jon glances back and sees a figure standing on the battlements, long hair blowing in the breeze, and he wonders if this is the last time he will ever Sansa.

He has been on Bear Island for several moons when the raven arrives from Winterfell. Jon does not recognize the handwriting on the parchment. It is not Maester Luwin’s careful hand or Bran’s shaky script; it is far too delicate for Ser Rodrik and Rickon does not know his letters yet. He hopes for a moment it is from Robb, but Robb is not at Winterfell; he is still in the Riverlands, attacking the Lannisters at every turn.

He breaks the direwolf seal and finds himself startled to see the letter is from Jeyne.

*Dear Jon,*

*I hope this letter finds you on Bear Island. I know we do not know each other well and we may not ever know each other, but I felt I had no choice but to write you. I only ask you handle this with discretion as Robb would never forgive me for writing this.*

*Shortly after you left, Robb sent Sansa, Lady Catelyn, and me to Winterfell. The reason for this was not revealed to anyone but Lady Catelyn and me: Sansa was pregnant and Robb wished to hide it to protect her good name. Sansa has refused to reveal who fathered her child, but Robb confided the truth to me. The plan, as it currently stands, is for the two of us to remain out of sight for the duration of Sansa’s pregnancy; when the child is born, Robb and I will claim it as our own.*

*Sansa is well and truly miserable, Jon. She does not want to part with her child, and honestly I cannot bear the idea of being the one responsible for it. As I said, I do not know you well, but I like to believe I know Sansa as well as anyone can. She misses you, and I do not wish to contribute to her suffering.*

*I am not sure what you will do with this knowledge. Quite honestly, I do not know what I expect you to do with it. But I do know a child will be born here in two moons’ time, and that child is yours and Sansa’s.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jeyne Stark*

Jon reads the letter a dozen times, unable to believe what he is reading. *A child…*

Immediately he tries to think of when it could have happened. They had tried to be so careful about stopping a pregnancy before it began, but Jon couldn’t deny they’d been careless towards the end.
Pleasure began outweighing reason, and this is the result.

The shame is overpowering. To get a bastard on her is one thing, but to abandon her to bear the consequences of it alone is unforgivable. He does not even know he can begin to make this right, and he certainly does not know how to make it right without also being put to death by his brother.

He leaves Bear Island as abruptly as he arrived, apologizing to Jorelle and Lyra but insisting he had to go. Riding as hard as he can, it still takes over a fortnight to reach Winterfell, and he arrives filthy, exhausted, and starved.

“Jon!” Rickon cries as he slides from his saddle, his legs weak and wobbly from the hard ride. He hugs his youngest brother tightly, so grateful to be home even if it is likely to get him killed.

Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrik come to greet him, Hodor carrying Bran on his back; Jon does not recognize the boy and girl with them, but Bran introduces them as Meera and Jojen Reed. There is the wildling woman Rickon clings to, the one they call Osha, and little Beth and Old Nan, and Jon wonders when home became so familiar and so strange at the same time.

Lady Stark stands at the entrance to the castle, her arms folded across her chest, face as disapproving as ever. Jon disentangles himself from the group and approaches her, steeling himself for what is about to happen.

“I’ve come to see Sansa.”

The last thing he expects is for Lady Stark to nod and say, “She’s in her chamber.” He will wonder about this later; for now all he can focus on is Sansa.

She is seated in her bed, her back against the headboard, feet propped up on a pillow; her stomach is massive, swollen to accommodate their growing child, and she seems to glow. Jeyne sits beside her bed in a high-backed chair, and both turn to face him as he enters, Sansa clearly shocked while Jeyne smiles.

“Jon, what are you…?”

“I’ll leave you,” Jeyne quickly pipes up, hurrying out the door. She catches Jon’s hand on the way, squeezing it tightly, and Jon does not know how he will ever be able to thank Robb’s wife.

He closes the chamber door, crossing to the bed and climbing in beside her. Jon doesn’t hesitate to kiss her, pouring every moment of the last few months’ longing into it, and Sansa moans against his mouth, clutching his jerking with desperate hands.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she confesses between kisses. “Robb wouldn’t tell me where you were, and after I found out about the babe, everything started happening so fast – “

“I didn’t know, I swear it. I came the second I learned of it – “

“I don’t want to give the baby to Robb and Jeyne, Jon. I don’t care if it’s a bastard, I don’t care if I never make a suitable marriage, I just want to keep it. My mother keeps saying it will be alright, that at least I can watch the babe grow up this way, but it’s mine, it’s ours, we made it and it’s part of me and – “

“No one will take our child, Sansa. I swear it.”

She nods, smiling through tears, and Jon hugs her as best he can. Sansa leads one of his hands to her belly, and Jon grins as he feels movement beneath his palm. He lays his head against Sansa’s
shoulder, their hands entwined over the babe, and it is the last thing Jon is aware of before drifting off into an exhausted sleep.

It is the middle of the night when Jon finally wakes, stumbling down to the kitchens for something to eat and some wine. Sansa asks him to bring back a crock of preserves and thick slices of bread, and Jon agrees. He is juggling the small feast in his hands when he notices Lady Stark standing in the shadows. Suddenly he feels like a child again, swiping cakes with Robb, and Jon swallows back his immediate instinct to apologize, to make himself small so as not to try her patience. He has always known his mere presence is a reminder to Lady Stark of how his father loved another; and whether it was fair or not, Jon never wished to cause anyone, even Lady Stark, pain.

“I had thought you would come sooner. You never struck me as the type to shirk responsibility.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Stark, I don’t understand – “

“The two of you thought you were so clever, sneaking about, stealing glances at meals, whispering in corners. It was as if you thought you were the first people in the history of the world to have an affair.”

“You knew?”

“I knew she had a lover. I had my suspicions. I did not know for sure until Robb sent you away after fighting so damned hard for you to stay.”

“Then why didn’t you turn me away today?”

“I’ve lost Ned and Arya. I still might lose Robb before this war is over. I cannot lose Sansa too. So while this disgusts me to my very core, I do not think my heart can bear seeing Sansa so miserable much longer. Robb will deal with you. Are you prepared for that?”

“I love her, Lady Stark.”

“As the Kingslayer loves Queen Cersei, I’m sure.”

The words are a dagger in his heart.

“We could still flee to Braavos,” Sansa says one morning as she soaks in the bath, Jon running a cloth over her back. “Though I’m not sure how quickly we’ll be able to flee since I am fatter than Lord Manderly now.”

“You’d give birth on the ship. And I doubt you’d want to be so far from everyone.”

“We could wed there. If you would want something like that,” she quickly adds, averting her gaze. “I certainly don’t mean I expect you to wed me just because – “

“Would you wish to marry me, a bastard who might lose his head when Robb rides north?”

“Robb won’t take your head. He was just angry at finding us the way he did. And you are the most honorable man I know, bastard or not.” She huffs, flicking water at him. “And stop saying ‘bastard’ like that. If our child is to be a Snow, I don’t want you moping over it.”

“I don’t mop!” he objects, offended at the characterization.

Sansa laughs, splashing him again.
Bran is technically the Lord the Winterfell while Robb is gone, but he is quick to ask for Jon’s help in the running of the castle. He is not certain Lady Stark approves, but he is grateful to fill his days being useful. It keeps his mind off of what is going to happen when Robb returns, when the babe is born, when the war is over and he has to answer for what he has done.

He is working in the yard helping to fortify one of the walls before the hard winter snows begin when he sees a trio of people enter the yard. One is a man about his age, broad shouldered and heavily muscled with messy black hair; he is flanked by a fat boy on one side and a slight boy with short, shaggy hair on the other. There have been dozens of smallfolk coming lately, desperate for a place to stay and food; they turn no one away and Jon is about to direct them towards the kitchens when the slight boy cries out his name. It is then he sees the blade on the boy’s hip and realizes it isn’t a boy at all.

“Arya!” he shouts, leaping down from the ladder to meet her halfway across the yard, swinging her about as if she is a child again. The commotion brings everyone to the yard, including Lady Stark, who cries as she holds Arya fiercely to her breast. Even Sansa manages to make it downstairs, waddling towards his sister, both of them apologizing for imagined wrongs they committed before their father’s murder, tears wetting both their faces.

Arya introduces her companions as Hot Pie and Gendry Waters, and Jon sees the way Gendry and Arya look at her. Jon cannot help but laugh to himself.

Poor Lady Stark, both of her daughters falling in love with bastards.

“Wake up, stupid!”


“Arya is having the baby. Jeyne said to fetch you.”

He is still not sure what Arya thinks of his relationship with Sansa, but he thinks that, much like the others in the castle, she tries not to think of it at all. As he quickly dresses, hurrying up the stairs to Sansa’s chamber, he tries not to let his nervousness and fear show. He can hear Maester Luwin’s voice inside, Lady Catelyn and Jeyne both trying to soothe Sansa as she groans and cries out, and Jon freezes, uncertain if he should enter or not.

“Oh, honestly!” Arya grunts, pushing him with two hands towards the hand, and Jon feels faint as he sees Sansa in bed, her shift pushed up to her hips, knees bent and spread with Maester Luwin between them. Lady Catelyn is on one side of her, Jeyne on the other, both tightly clutching her hands, and Sansa’s smile is more grimace than anything else.

He approaches her bedside slowly, uncertain what his role is to be here. Jon only vaguely recalls Lady Stark’s births; they always remained outside the door with his father until Maester Luwin came out to announce the baby’s sex. The sole exception was Bran’s birth, and Ned only entered the chamber because Lady Stark had been in labor for days and the whole castle was whispering she would die in the birthing bed. Jeyne gives him her seat, moving to fetch water for Sansa, and he soberly meets Lady Stark’s gaze over Sansa’s body. No matter how she feels about him and this situation, Jon knows she loves Sansa fiercely and only wants what will make this easiest for Sansa.

It kills him to see Sansa in so much pain. He has never known anyone as strong as her, and to see her at the mercy of something he cannot fix agitates him. Jon smooths her hair off of her damp brow, holding the cups of water Jeyne fetches to Sansa’s chapped lips. When Maester Luwin announces it
is time for her to push, Jon realizes battle has not prepared him for this.

Though Maester Luwin later says it is a fast labor, time seems to slow down as Sansa struggles to bring their child into the world. When she finally pushes for the last time, a primal scream ripping from her lips, Jon is certain she won’t survive this. And then she sinks back against the pillows, crying and laughing as their child wails at the indignity of it all.

“‘It is a girl, Lady Sansa,’” Maester Luwin announces, moving to check the babe’s health. Jon presses a kiss to Sansa’s temple as they wait for the child to be placed in her arms. Lady Stark crosses the room to assist Maester Luwin and Jon knows something is wrong. They are speaking in soft, urgent voices, and Sansa looks at him with frightened eyes.

“What’s wrong? Mother, what’s wrong with my daughter?”

“Nothing, my dear,” Lady Catelyn assures her, carefully cradling the babe in her arms as she brings her to Sansa. “She is a healthy babe.”

But Jon instantly sees what has confounded Lady Stark and Maester Luwin. Their daughter, the child whose blood should be more Stark than anything else, looks up at them with violet eyes, silver hair capping her small head.

“I don’t understand,” is all Sansa can say, looking at him in confusion.

Jon doesn’t understand either.

They call her Dara, a good Northern name for their decidedly un-Northern looking daughter. Each time Jon holds Dara, he wonders if she takes after his mother and her family, and he can see Lady Stark wondering the same thing. He asks Maester Luwin if he has any idea who his mother was, if Lord Stark ever mentioned it; Luwin apologizes, reminding him he did not come to Winterfell until after the Rebellion and Lord Stark never confided in him.

It is Meera Reed, of all people, who solves the puzzle for him.

“Did Lord Stark ever tell you what happened at the Tower of Joy?” she asks him one afternoon when he is returning from the godswood.

She is a strange one, Bran’s friend from the Neck, but Jon politely answers the strange question, telling her that all he knows is his father and her father slain Ser Arthur Dayne.

“My father told me everything before he sent us here. Would you like to hear it? It will not take long.”

There is so much to do as winter approaches, but Jon does not want to be rude. He agrees, mentally calculating all he has to do before he can join Sansa and Dara again.

“After Arthur Dayne fell, my father and Lord Stark went up the stairs to find Lady Lyanna. She was near death when they found her. But she wasn’t alone in the room.”

Jon blinks in surprise. He has never heard this part of the story. “She wasn’t?”

“No. You see, before Rhaegar rode out to the Trident, he had gotten Lady Lyanna pregnant. She’d given birth only a few days before Lord Stark found her, and her son was there as well. She made Lord Stark promise he’d protect her son from the people who would want to harm Rhaegar’s child, who would have more claim to the throne than anyone left in Westeros. Do you understand, Jon?”
He does not finish the tasks that need done, hurrying inside the castle to Sansa’s chamber. She is half-dozing in bed, Dara happily nursing, and Jon can only look at them, the woman he loves and his daughter, as he thinks about the implications of Meera’s story.

“I am not your brother,” he murmurs, testing out the words.

“What?” Sansa asks sleepily, switching Dara to her other breast.

“I think I know who my mother was.”

And then Jon recounts Meera’s story for her, more certain with every word that it is the truth.

He writes Robb if for no other reason than to solve the mystery they had discussed so many times before. It would be a lie to say part of his reasoning is not self-preservation; cousins wed all the time, and Jon wishes desperately to build a household with Sansa and Dara. But after a lifetime of sharing the names they’d heard whispered by servants, Jon wants to share Meera’s story with the only person he has ever been able to discuss his nameless mother with.

“Ask Howland Reed,” Jon implores, hoping for the absolution Howland’s story can offer.

Sansa is unconcerned with Robb’s permission. She shares the story with Lady Stark and states her intention to marry Jon, with or without her support. If Lady Stark believes the story, Jon is not sure, but one evening after supper he glimpses Lady Stark working on a Stark marriage cloak.

“Do you really think you’re a Targaryen?” Arya asks when they go riding one morning, not tiptoeing around the issue the way everyone else does.

“I think I’m a Stark no matter who fathered me.”

“But if Rhaegar was your father, then bastard or not, you’re the rightful king.”

Jon smiles. “Westeros has enough men claiming to be king, don’t you think?”

He has no wish to be king no matter what right he might have. Knowing that he has the right is enough.

Robb returns to Winterfell with the Northern army, triumphant over the Lannisters, Lord Tywin granting the secession of the North and the Riverlands in order to preserve the rest of the kingdoms. Renly and Stannis still duke it out for the Iron Throne, but Jon does not care. This was never about the Iron Throne, not for them.

Jon stands tall in the yard as Robb rides in, determined to meet his gaze and accept whatever he says. They squarely look at each other, Jon acutely aware of everyone watching them, when Robb’s grim face breaks into a grin.

“Hello, cousin.”

He and Sansa wed in the godswood a fortnight later, the snows creeping up past their ankles. As a wedding present Robb makes him Hand of the King, gifting Sansa an expensive necklace. Jeyne teases Sansa that she didn’t receive such a fine wedding present, and Jon still cannot believe this is how everything is ending up.

Sansa insists there be no bedding ceremony, and so they sneak away when everyone is in their cups.
They have not shared a bed since Dara’s birth, and Jon feels almost as anxious as he did that first night at Riverrun. Sansa laughs at him, kissing his brow and assuring him she will be gentle, and Jon does not think anyone has ever been as happy as he is in that moment.

“Robb offered to legitimize me, to name me Rhaegar’s son,” he tells her later when they are sated.

“I hope you said no.”

“You do not want to have a proper name, for Dara to have one?”

“We have a proper name. You are not a Targaryen, Jon, not really. If I am not Sansa Stark, I am content to be Sansa Snow. I did not fall in love with Jon Targaryen.”

“It is a bastard’s name.”

“It is your name, and now it is mine. It is only shameful if we let it be, and I will tell you right now, Jon Snow, that I will let anyone shame us for it.”

Jon smiles, pulling her even tighter against him and pressing a firm kiss to the crown of her head. “I love you.”

“That’s very good to hear, Lord Snow, because you are stuck with me forever now.”

Forever has never seemed so wonderful.

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