

And The World Shifted

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And The World Shifted

by [LovelessRose](#)

Summary

Diverges after Arya chooses the path back home in 7x4. Arya returns to Winterfell, and everything she has repressed comes to the surface.

Chapter 1

Entering the gates of Winterfell, Arya couldn't help but shiver as she looked around. She didn't shiver from the cold. The winds of the North could never illicit that reaction out of her. No, it was from seeing her home for the first time since she was but a girl.

The years had not been kind to her home. Between Theon Greyjoy and the Boltons, there was much to be done to wipe those stains from the beloved buildings that protected her in her youth.

She felt the rustle of fur next to her, and Nymeria's nose bump against her hand gently, urging her from her thoughts. It was still a wonder to Arya that they were together again. She had thought the she wolf turned her back on her forever in the forest clearing. But when Arya had awoken and continued her journey home, Nymeria had fallen into step a few miles after, never looking back.

Arya still hadn't fully faced the wolf, so much left unspoken since they last saw one another. It was merely a journey for now. They would have a proper reunion once they returned home.

It would be the second most important one she would have.

Arya looked around at the people scurrying about, all faces that were unfamiliar to her. For the first time since leaving the House of Black and White, she allowed herself to grieve, if only briefly. It was a silent pain, walking the grounds her parents walked, passing structures Bran loved to climb, while looking at the training grounds where her big brothers would spar, and remembering the giggles from Sansa and Jeyne as they observed. As quickly as the thought had come, it was replaced, an indifferent mask placed back on her face. She turned a corner, heading towards the hall.

It was easy for her to navigate the grounds without being noticed. If she were grateful for one thing in her training, it was that. Walking undetected- hiding in plain sight- meant she could take her time. It meant she could assess a situation, using as much time as she needed. She recited what she knew in her head.

Jon took back Winterfell

Jon is King of the North

Sansa is with him

She recited it again. And again. And again.

The more she said it, the more her heartbeat seemed to quicken. She made her way to a deserted nook between two buildings and leaned heavily against one of the walls.

Everything had been so clear when she began her journey. Jon was home. He was alive and safe. He was home again, and she could join him. They could be a family, and go back to some semblance of happiness. Nymeria could have her family back, too. She had heard whispers of a white direwolf with red eyes, and knew Ghost would be anywhere that Jon was.

Her mantra of Jon and Sansa, of Winterfell, of a new start sounded just like the mantra she had spoken every night for the past few years. The mantra that led her to the life she led.

Her list.

It was that thought that almost had her heaving in the heavy snow at her feet. How could she face him, and jump in his arms and be loved and protected by him as if she hadn't killed?

Becoming No One was cathartic. It was far easier to forget than it was to remember. Forgetting was simple; immersing one's self in giving up worldly possessions and past memories was far preferable to the alternative, despite everything the waif put her through.

Past memories came back in haunting stages after she left, sometimes sneaking up on her and shifting her entire world on its axis.

Traveling away from Braavos, she felt that first shift when asked if she had a mother and father and had to bite the back of her hand to stop the well of tears as she answered no.

She felt another shift in the kitchen as she put the Frey pies over the fire and walked out to see the exact spot where Grey Wind's cage was, and all but saw the men parade her brother's corpse through the night.

This was another shift, and she couldn't tell if it was a shift or if her world would shatter. If Jon knew the things she was capable of...

Nymeria was alert as Arya swayed in place for several more seconds, gently nudging her and whimpering with every shaking breath Arya took. Eventually, she fell to her knees and embraced Nymeria, burying her face deep in the wolf's neck. It was the first hug she had since Ned Stark's death.

Nymeria nipped Arya gently and put her paws on Arya's knees. It took a few moments for her to get her bearings, and when she did, she wiped her tears with dirt smudged hands and stood again. She knew with every fiber of her being that if she allowed herself to give in to the years since leaving Winterfell, she wouldn't be able to get back up again.

The only thought driving her was the one that kept solace with her every moment since she was brought to King's Landing: She was going to see Jon again.

She was going to finally be with the person she had been trying to get to since she left home. The person-if given the choice-she would have gone to the Wall with, even if that meant spending the rest of her days there.

Jon was her family, her breath of fresh air. He loved her unconditionally, believed in her when no one else had, and gifted her with the sword that saved her life more than he would ever know. Even when he wasn't there, he saved her life.

Arya and Nymeria reached the hall to see it packed with people. Moving close to the wall, she maneuvered quietly into the room and made her way to a corner. Nymeria followed suit, and Arya raised an eyebrow in surprise at just how subtle the large wolf's movements were.

Whether it was the topic of conversation or the peoples' comfort with direwolves, Arya didn't question. Instead, she took the opportunity to take in the situation. Bannermen and knights lined the back wall where she stood, and at the center tables sat what looked like lords from the neighboring lands. She recognized the sigils of House Mormont, and of course the Vale, along with a few others. Their demeanors were stern, yet none threatening.

Good, Arya thought as she reached across her body to grip the hilt of Needle. Whatever discussion was happening, it didn't look like it would turn hostile. Arya's hand remained at her belt as her eyes roamed the rest of the room. When her gaze reached the head table at the front of the hall, she couldn't stop the gasp that escaped.

Jon and Sansa were sitting at the table, side by side, looking out into the crowd. Her eyes lingered on Jon, and she felt a heavy emotion as she looked at him. His hair was longer, so long that he had to tie it up. His face held bruises and scars that seemed out of place compared to what she remembered, but his eyes were what she really focused on. His eyes said more to her in that moment than any words could have. They spoke of pain, death, and a sense of duty and honor he couldn't escape from.

Arya knew those things all too well. She turned her face away, not bearing to be able to look at him any longer. She turned her focus to Sansa next, who had just finished voicing a thought to the crowd surrounding her.

Sansa had not seemed to change much from the girl she once was. Her hair was also longer, and her posture was very much that of a lady. Her voice was strong and confident, the same as Arya remembered from the last time they spoke. Arya noticed the difference now, though. It was clear that- like Jon- she also had demons. Despite seeing that, Arya was not shocked to find that she did not hold the same compassion for her that she had for Jon moments before.

The lords in the room seemed placated by whatever her sister said, each of them nodding their heads in disgruntled agreement. Arya had no use for the conversation. Her intent was to wait them out. The sooner they left, the sooner she could start rooting herself to her home again.

It took only a few minutes more before the meeting ended. Jon and Sansa remained seated as the lords and their men filed out of the large hall. Arya kept her place in the corner, hardly noticeable through the crowd. Those who had spotted her during the meeting assumed she was a cup-bearer or a maid, by the looks they had given her as they gestured to flasks of wine when their cups ran dry. Those men had merely given her a disapproving look as they left.

When the hall door finally closed behind the last person, Jon breathed a deep sigh. Sansa stood abruptly, her dress swaying as she walked to stand on the opposite side of the table in front of Jon.

"You really shouldn't have said that to them." She chastised.

"I didn't have a choice, Sansa. They needed to know the truth and what I was planning to do. The white walkers are coming." He responded, exasperated that he had to repeat his warning yet again.

“Yes, but they need to be reassured that their loyalty is being rewarded, at least in some part by a King willing to take in their concerns when offered.” Sansa continued.

Arya watched their exchange from her place, and a familiar twinge of anger rose in her chest at the way Sansa was speaking to him. Maybe it was another shift of the past, one where she remembered cold indifference or barely concealed hostility from Sansa to Jon. Or maybe it was the look she saw in Jon’s eyes earlier. The look that showed that, despite his faults, he was still trying his best to do what was right.

She felt the anger rise and realized it was the former; it looked like Sansa was still the same.

Arya moved then, but stopped in her tracks when her boot collided with a nearby chair. Their eyes were on her immediately, and the silence that followed was almost deafening.

Chapter 2

No one spoke for the longest moment, each too stunned to make a move. Sansa held her hand to her mouth, her fingers trembling. Jon stayed seated, his eyes wide and mouth agape. He felt like he was frozen in place, unable to move even if he wanted to.

Arya, his mind screamed, the sound ripping through him with enough force that if it tried hard enough, it could tear its way into his vocal cords and out his mouth.

It couldn't be her. No... he wouldn't bring himself to believe it.

How long had he waited for this moment? How many nights had he stayed awake thinking of her? How many times had he cried himself to sleep under the ice sky of the Night's Watch, knowing there was a chance he would never get to see her again? Whether or not she was dead or alive?

Too many, was the answer. Too many nights of fierce promises to look for her. Too many thoughts of ways he could- ways he would – break his vows without bringing dishonor to his Lord father. Too many memories of being forcefully held by his brothers as he tried leaving through the gate. Even more memories of fighting them off, though they held fast at Jon's own request.

He'd never given up, but he'd stopped himself from believing.

He stood then, the sound of the chair scraping against the floor and the creak of the table from where his hands rested sounding too loud. He walked around the table and moved forward, gently brushing Sansa's hand from his shoulder to stop him. He understood her concern. It was hard not to.

They had been through so much in such a short amount of time. He and Sansa had been reunited, they watched their brother die, and fought a battle to take back their home. Between getting their bearings, and trying to hold the North together, he couldn't deny Sansa's silent urge to be cautious.

As he got closer to the girl, he knew he could not use caution. He had to know, had to see for himself, if it was truly her.

"Arya." Her name left his lips in a whisper. His gaze was trained on her face, looking for any sign of recognition. He looked for the toothy smile she would give him when he hugged her tightly, or the mischievous glint in her eyes when she used to play pranks on Sansa. Her rosy cheeks from being out in the sun too long when she should have been doing her needlework. The wildness of the hair he used to love to muss.

If he saw even a hint of those things, he felt he would fall apart.

Arya gasped when she heard her name. It was the sound- the voice she tried with all her might to remember. Hearing it brought tears to her eyes, and she could feel herself start to

smile. She almost stopped when she realized just how long it had been since she actually had.

Gendry came close, but that was different. Gendry made her laugh, and they helped each other through their travels. And though he may have made her laugh, Jon was the only one to make her smile.

She barely heard the sound of thudding footsteps before she felt herself lifted off the ground and engulfed in a crushing embrace.

“Arya!” Jon yelled, his arms tightening around her. He knew it was her. That smile after he whispered her name told him all he needed to know.

Arya, for all the time she waited for this moment, had no idea what to do. Her arms wrapped themselves around his neck of their own accord, and her head buried itself in the crook of his neck. Her body seemed to have a mind of its own, past memories of being loved guiding her movements. The tears in her eyes escaped then, traveling down her cheek and ending in the fabric of Jon’s tunic.

Her body shook as Jon’s arms tightened around her, the reverberations mimicked in his own movements.

Jon’s mind was an abyss of emotion as he held Arya. Words raced through his head a mile a minute, every thought and every sentence laced with grief and guilt and love and redemption. Having her in his arms felt like hot and cold knives were piercing into him, his heart thrumming with life with every breath he felt her take.

He was nothing and he was everything, all at the same time.

“Arya...Arya...” He murmured, running a hand through her short hair and resting it at her neck.

Arya answered back fervently, reciting his name against his neck as she held him. Nothing else mattered to her in that moment. She briefly felt the sensation of fur against her leg, and somewhere in the haze of her mind, she remembered Nymeria’s presence. If she turned around, she was likely to see the wolf perched next to her, beholding the scene.

She wasn’t sure how long they had embraced, or how long they would remain that way. If left up to her, she would never let go of him again. Just as the emotional onslaught in her mind began to clear, the sound of footsteps approaching behind Jon assaulted her ears.

Within seconds, Arya detached herself from Jon’s embrace and turned- back to back with him- to face the oncoming threat. She had unsheathed Needle during the turn, and the blade was mere inches from her target before she heard the sharp intake of breath come from the lips of her sister.

Sansa’s greeting caught in her throat, her feet planted firmly on the ground in shock. Fear was etched in her features as she stared into the blade of the sword.

She had witnessed the reunion of her siblings from a distance, smiling sadly as she watched them. It was a bittersweet moment, knowing all of her living siblings were home again, while silently praying to the old gods that her mother, father and brothers were watching from beyond. She gave Arya and Jon a moment to themselves, knowing from years of spectating how close her little sister and half brother were.

The last thing she expected was to have a weapon raised to her when moving to join them.

Arya's eyes were wide and feral before recognition allowed her to lower Needle abruptly and sheath it once more. Her face softened while she breathed out an apology to Sansa.

Arya sensed Nymeria before she saw her, her strong presence next to her bringing comfort. Glancing over, she saw Nymeria begin to relax, her teeth no longer bared, her stance no longer threatening. The direwolf looked to Arya once more before sitting back on her hunches.

Arya moved forward, holding her hands out as a sign of peace to the woman in front of her. Jon was still behind her, but she had no desire to face him. The panic she felt earlier rose in her chest again, pausing her movements briefly.

She could only imagine what Jon looked like right then. Did he look at her in fear, the way Sansa had? In silent support like Nymeria? Did he see her as a monster who pulled a sword on her own sister without thought? She forced the doubts from her mind as she focused on Sansa. She would have her time to speak with Jon, and to hear his thoughts. She would deal with it then.

"I'm so sorry, Sansa." She began, moving closer still to take Sansa's hands in hers. "I was startled. It has been a long journey."

Sansa gazed at her sister, nodding slowly at her answer. Sansa also experienced long journeys, and if they were anything like her own, she could only imagine the horrors her sister must have endured to think unsheathing a weapon was her only option.

Sansa glanced at Jon from behind the smaller girl, gauging his thoughts. She saw his eyes trained on Arya, and by the hard look on his face, she knew his thoughts were the same as hers. There was a clear difference between them, however, and that difference was as clear a line as their relationships with Arya were.

Sansa was sympathetic. Jon was murderous.

Jon stared at Arya as she spoke to Sansa, his hands balled into fists as he willed his anger down. Adrenaline still pumped through him from Arya's defensive movement, but this time he had nothing but his own thoughts and theories to concentrate on.

What happened to her? Who has hurt her? He thought, those questions consuming him as he studied her back. He took in every physical detail he could as she stood in front of him. He noticed her stance was rigid, even when relaxed enough to approach Sansa. And even though he heard her apology, her tone held no remorse for her earlier action.

It took all of his willpower not to let a growl escape from his throat. Arya was always brave and strong willed, and always willing to help and protect her family. She never raised a hand or a sword to anyone unless she felt threatened. The ease in which she drew her weapon meant it was a well practiced skill. One that wouldn't have to be practiced if it hadn't had to be used. And certainly not a skill executed with such ease without years of utility. The thought of someone making her feel unsafe made his blood pump faster through his veins.

Sansa looked at him again, and he forced the thoughts aside. He would speak with Arya. And he vowed to the old gods and the new that he would ensure she never felt unsafe again.

Sansa turned her attention back to Arya and smiled. "It's alright, Arya. We are just glad that you're home." She sincerely meant that. She was truly happy to see her sister. It meant that Winterfell was a little more like home. It also further solidified their place in the North, which was important with all of the political negotiations that were happening.

Arya smiled back, her hand reaching down to seek out Nymeria. The direwolf moved closer and nuzzled against her.

Sansa looked at the scene, her heart fluttering as she thought of Lady. Before her thoughts could stray farther, she took Arya's free hand in hers and faced Jon.

"Our dear sister must be tired after her journey." She patted Arya's hand before taking Jon's and joining theirs together. "I'll go to the kitchens and have them prepare an early meal. Jon, I'm sure you will escort her to her room?"

"Aye." He responded, moving Arya's hand to the crook of his arm. Arya allowed him to lead her out of the hall.

Chapter 3

Jon and Arya were silent as they walked the grounds of Winterfell. While Jon looked straight ahead, Arya followed half a step behind, taking in the sights. The snow fell heavily around them, thick flakes sticking to them as their feet trudged through the fresh white powder. Arya couldn't help the elation she felt upon seeing snow through the eyes of home. After being away for so long, she didn't think she would ever get tired of looking at Winterfell. And now that she had Jon by her side, she could inspect it with a clear mind.

There was much to be done, it seemed. Some of the structures needed to be rebuilt, fixtures and furniture replaced. She didn't have to be told that most of what was once present in her childhood had been destroyed and looted. Hot Pie's brief description of a battle had all but hinted at most of the destruction before her. There was really only one place she prayed was still intact.

"The crypt?" She asked, hesitantly.

"Untouched." Jon replied, his gaze still forward.

She nodded, the relief she felt relaxing her limbs. Out of everything, she would have been devastated if anything happened to it. "I'd like to go there soon."

She couldn't see his face, but the hard flex of his arm hinted his answer. "Whenever you'd like."

After a few more moments, they reached her childhood chambers and stopped outside. Arya detached herself from Jon and placed her hand on the handle of the door. Biting her lip, she pushed it open, allowing the light from outside to filter in.

The room was smaller than she remembered, even without half of the trinkets that once inhabited the space. The bed in the corner was stripped of covers, and the desk that used to hold haphazardly thrown needlework and stolen arrows was no longer there, leaving too much room in its wake.

From the looks of it, the room had been tidied just enough to remain presentable, but did not look to be used for a long while, if the layers of dust on the remaining furniture was any indication.

She didn't know exactly what happened to Winterfell since her departure, but hushed conversations and drunken yells told a story of usurpers and violation. Looking at the remains of the room, it didn't take much to see that it hadn't been spared.

She steeled her expression and turned away from the desolate space of her childhood to look at Jon, who still stood a few paces away. Unaware of her thoughts, his eyes roamed the room, as if it was the first time he had seen it as well. A frown formed on his lips, and he turned his head away tersely.

He turned back around just enough to hold his arm out to her again. "I'll show you to your chambers, now." His tone was clipped, but it was not directed at her.

She took his arm again and turned her back to the still open door. Too much happened, the room too far gone for her to feel comfortable being there. She knew this, just as Jon had. He brought her there strictly out of the obligation to allow her to choose.

Jon let out a breath as he felt her take his arm, allowing him to guide her away. Since he and Sansa had taken back Winterfell, he could never bring himself to go near Arya's room. Even when Sansa would request his opinion on what the chambers would be used for, he would abruptly end any conversation surrounding it, the persistent tightening in his chest too much to bear.

Seeing the room for the first time since he'd been there last was like a punch to his stomach. Anything that marked that room as hers was no longer there, and any remains of polished wood and satin linens had been destroyed long before. He had expected as much, his mind imagining the horrors that may have occurred in that space.

He was prepared, if Arya entered the room with the intention to stay. He was prepared to offer any argument he could to convince her to go elsewhere.

But, she understood. He saw it in the way her muscles tensed when she opened the door. Saw it in the way her eyes lingered on memories passed, and the knowledge that seeped in when she turned to face him again that the room she once knew- the happy place it once was- was long gone.

Neither looked back as they walked away, with Jon leading her through another hallway in the castle. Turning down a corridor, they made their way through to the other rooms.

As Arya walked, she felt that shift again, her head swimming as her parent's bed chamber door loomed in the distance. She tightened her hold on Jon's arm involuntarily, loosening it again as quickly as she clutched it.

If he noticed, he didn't let on. Instead, he stopped in front of another door.

Arya looked at him in question. Jon's expression was contemplative and hesitant as he stared hard at the door in front of him. Arya could feel her lips turn down at the sight. She'd seen that look too many times in her youth, usually in response to whispered taunts or her mother's sometimes vengeful maligning.

Plastered on his face was fear of rejection. Fear of her rejection. She had to hold in a humorless laugh. No matter how many years separated them, her rejection in any form was something he never had to worry about. That he was nervous at all was something that she would be quick to address later.

Instead, she remained silent as she waited for him to say something.

"Sansa's chambers are down the hall." He commented, clearing his throat of the hoarseness from his words. He inclined his head to the door Arya's focus had been on earlier.

“She took mother and father’s chambers.” She stated, not at all surprised. There was no doubt her sister felt she held that birthright. She was the eldest true-born Stark now, prepped from infancy in all the ways of the title of Lady Stark. Arya couldn’t help the hint of bitterness she felt.

Jon nodded, glancing down at her. There was no sign of judgement on his face as he replied. “She did.” He smiled sadly, reassuringly. “I wouldn’t have felt comfortable in that room. Besides, I don’t need much space. I am in Robb’s chambers.”

She squeezed his arm again, this time in comfort. It had been years, but the time did nothing to dull the pain of their brother’s death.

Jon brought his other hand to hers, resting it there, and trying his best to draw comfort from her presence. He nodded toward the door they stood in front of. “I…” He paused, trying to find the right words. “I…when I found you..or when you returned, I thought these would be best suited for you.”

He cleared his throat again, his words caught. “If you don’t want this one, you can choose another and I’ll have it cleaned—”

“I want this one.” She replied steadfastly, still staring at the door.

Robb’s room always fascinated her as a child, because his was the only one that had direct access to the one next to it. When Rickon was but a babe, it was a place used for their studies. When it was too cold to play outside, they would play in there, hiding behind curtains and using broken bows as swords. Even Sansa joined in occasionally, proclaiming herself lady of the tournament, laughing as Robb and Jon would fight for her honor. Some of the few times where there weren’t septas and maesters or bastards of the North.

The room in front of her was that room. There was nowhere else she would have chosen.

“This is where I want to be.” She turned to face him, her tone leaving no room for argument. Being that close to him- having one door as the only layer of separation- was more than she could have asked for.

Jon breathed out harshly, his lungs feeling as if they swelled to capacity at her response. “I’m glad. I feel that I can protect you better if you’re here.”

“I was just thinking the same of you.” Arya whispered, her steel gaze tracing the symmetric patterns on the surface of the door.

Jon turned to her again, his vibrant gray eyes darkened with emotion. He almost let out a laugh, having heard her words clearly. Endearment tugged at his heart, and the elation and familiarity of having her back, and of being in her presence brought him a peace he had long since forgotten.

And having her close to him, within mere steps of reach was a gift he would never stop thanking the gods for.

Moving away from her, he opened the door and gestured for her walk ahead of him.

Chapter 4

Once she and Jon were inside, she looked around. It was slightly larger than her old room, and even larger still than the one she shared at the House of Black and White. Shelves stood tall, and the Stark sigils hung proudly against the walls between them. The windows let in little sun, but the candlelight and the fireplace would be more than suitable substitutes for the natural light.

The bed in the corner was larger than any one she slept in since leaving King's Landing. The bed covers were a dark blue, complementing the gray sigil tapestry. Everything else in the room was modest, trinkets placed here or there to add aesthetics.

Jon watched Arya walk around, touching various items she came across. Sansa had been slowly going through each room, trying to undo the damage of those who tried to stake claim over what was theirs. He thought it unnecessary at first; what good would any of it be when the threat beyond the wall was eminent? Now, he couldn't thank Sansa enough.

Arya looked more relaxed, slowly taking in her surroundings. He couldn't help but think of the first dreamless sleep he would have, knowing that the missing piece of his soul was back with him once again.

"Does this please you?" He asked, moving to stand near the fireplace.

"Yes. This feels like my old room should have." She picked up a book and opened it, glancing through pages before closing it again.

A thought crossed his mind, and he couldn't help the downturn of his lips as he inquired, "Have you brought anything with you from your travels?" He never saw a sack or anything that may have held belongings.

"No." She reached over her side to unsheathe her sword. "This is all I have." She twirled Needle in her hand before presenting him with the hilt.

He raised a brow as he took it from her, a barrage of questions on his lips of her life before coming home, but the words caught in his throat at the familiar item in his hand.

At the small, skinny sword, forged by Mikken what seemed like lifetimes ago.

His breath caught in his chest, and he had to close his eyes and battle against the rapid beating of his heart to tell himself to *breathe*.

"You've kept this? All this time?" He asked after a moment, balancing the sword on trembling fingers. His eyes glazed over from the sight of it. Like her, he could tell the small keepsake had seen its fair share of bloodshed. There were knicks in the hilt, and dirt imbedded in the design. It was not an item used for idle play, but one that had been handled often. The blade itself was dulled throughout the years, but the stains of triumphant combat were visible in the steel.

She watched as he examined the sword, smiling softly at the reverence in which he held it.

“I could never part with it.” She spoke with conviction. “You gave it to me. It was the only thing I had of you.”

He hissed out her name as he placed the sword on a nearby table and moved closer to her. Trembling hands ached to reach out to her, to hold her close again, but he resisted, too many questions on his lips to think of much else.

It was unkind to ask, he knew. It was too soon. She just walked through the gates. She was hungry and exhausted and if he loved her as he said he did, he would leave her to become acquainted with her surroundings. So much happened in his world that he still didn’t think he had the strength to speak of. Unseen horrors haunted his mind daily, so much so that it was a wonder he didn’t crumble from them. It was not fair to ask her to speak of her horrors.

But, he was selfish with her, and so the question formed on his lips anyway.

“Where have you been, little sister?”

His eyes bore into hers, freezing her in place. The question caught her off guard. It was one she had not expected him to ask.

If it had been anything else, if he had asked her for anything else, she would have given it in a heartbeat. After being separated for so long, there was little she would deny him. This request, however, was one she could not give. Not while everything around her was still spinning.

Not before she had a chance to sit and think and truly *believe* that she was back where she belonged.

Not until she had the opportunity to see her father, to bring Needle down and show him how skilled with a sword she was now, and to thank him for the kind man that he was. Not until she had the courage to ask where her youngest brothers and their direwolves were.

She moved to tell him as much, but a soft knock on the door broke her from her thoughts.

Jon tore his eyes away to see the door open and Sansa peak inside. She held a tray in her hands, insisting that she be the one to deliver food to her sister.

As soon as she sent the two of them away, Sansa knew exactly where Jon would take Arya. She caught him staring at the door sometimes, laying a hand against the strong wood, deep in thought. Somehow, Sansa knew he was thinking of Arya, and she did her best to make sure that was one of the first chambers restored as she went through the castle.

She felt it was futile, at first. After all, there was little hope that their sister was alive. There had been no word about a small girl with grey eyes and undeniable Stark features anywhere she had been. But, neither had there been word of her brothers, yet the letter from Ramsay gave rise to hope that she knew Jon latched on to, even if she herself did not.

She opened the door wider to accommodate the tray, Nymeria at her heels as she made her way into the room to set the food down near the bed.

Sansa was surprised Nymeria had not chosen to follow Arya and Jon. The direwolf remained near Sansa, walking with her to the kitchens and then to let the servants know that extra necessities were needed for Arya's room. It was silly, but she thought Nymeria may have been paying homage to her fallen sister by spending time with her. She didn't know why, but she truly believed that.

She hadn't seen Nymeria since the awful afternoon so long ago, when her sister forced her away while Lady paid the ultimate price of Sansa's own doing. It hurt to think back to that time, to think of how stupid she was. That Nymeria remembered her and willingly chose to be with her was a redemption Sansa didn't know she craved until that moment. It was the reason she decided to bring the tray herself instead of letting someone else do it.

She wanted to tell Arya as much, but the atmosphere she'd walked into prevented it. The tension in the room was stifling, and Sansa couldn't help but contemplate the conversation her presence interrupted.

Jon was stood in front of the smaller girl in the middle of the room, his stance rigid as he regarded Arya with what looked like utter vexation. It was the only word Sansa could think of, and she had to hold in the laugh that threatened to burst from her chest at the very thought. In all her life, Jon had never looked at Arya with anything other than devotion and adoration. There was no doubt in her mind that he was troubled by something, but there was a better chance of her sewing needles growing legs than of Jon being angry at his "little sister".

She decided to address Arya first, hoping that it would effectively shift whatever conversation she'd interrupted in another direction.

"I brought you meat pies and soup. I remember how fond you were of them..." She trailed off nervously, her throat suddenly dry and her body humming in embarrassment.

"Thank you." Arya murmured softly, glancing over at the tray. Her stomach growled involuntarily, and she was thankful that the sound was not loud enough to be heard. She hadn't had a hot meal since she left Hot Pie, and the steam rising from the soup and the smells wafting from the pies was so tempting that she would eat it even if it were her least favorite thing.

She moved away from Jon, feeling the distance immediately as she sat down on the edge of the bed. She could feel Jon's eyes following her every move, but she chose to ignore it in favor of Sansa's generosity.

And it was generous, considering that ladies did not make a habit of eating in their chambers. It was something their mother and septa Mordane would never allow unless they were ill. That Sansa did not escort her down to the hall to have her meal was a side she never thought she would see of her sister.

Nymeria left Sansa's side to Jon's, bumping her nose against his side affectionately. Arya watched them from her place, a smile coming to her lips as he reached to scratch behind her ear. He muttered something to her, his voice low but gentle and reassuring, and Nymeria gave him one last nip before trotting out of the room.

Sansa raised a brow in question, but Arya answered in his stead.

"Ghost is close. I'm sure she can feel it."

Jon nodded, his heart swelling with the knowledge that Ghost and Nymeria would also have a proper reunion. It saddened him that they were the only ones who remained from the litter of pups brought to Winterfell what seemed like so long ago, just as it saddened him that Robb and Rickon were not amongst them as well.

Jon turned his attention to Arya again, watching as she ate with a speed barely restrained, and felt his chest tighten again. His words almost escaped, but he bit his tongue as he willed himself not to continue his earlier interrogation of her whereabouts.

He would speak to her again, there was no doubt. As of now, he knew what she was most interested in hearing about.

"Sansa, will you take Arya to the godswood after she has finished?" He asked, keeping his focus on the pie Arya began taking a bite of.

Sansa smiled softly, a knowing look in her eyes. "Yes, of course. He did say he would be there. Will you join us?"

He smiled sadly, shaking his head. "I've got some things to take care of with Ser Davos. I'll meet with you all after."

Arya wiped her mouth clean and looked between the two of them.

"Bran's home, too, Arya." Sansa told her, her smile demure, yet radiating happiness. "He came home a few days before."

"Bran?" She almost didn't recognize her own voice with how softly she uttered the name. It was a name she hadn't heard since his fall, and news of the cutthroat that tried to take his life. Saying his name for the first time in so long, she wasn't sure if it should feel foreign or familiar.

Sansa nodded, and felt like she and her sister shared something for the first time. Seeing Rickon at the Battle of the Bastards, and Bran when the crannogmen of Greywater Watch brought him back felt odd when it should have been memorable, off putting when it should have been anything but. Not for the first time, Sansa regretted not having been as close to her siblings as Jon had been to them. For all of her talk of him being her "bastard half brother", he was the only one who held no peculiar feelings when reunited with any of them. He'd embraced Sansa like the long lost sister she was, despite the horrible child she had been to him. It was more than she would have done had their roles been reversed. That thought almost made her sick to her stomach.

Arya also had a closer relationship with the rest, the only exception being Sansa herself.

“Yes. He’s...well, he’s well. His condition is still the same, but he’s grown taller, and wiser, from the sound of it.” Jon answered for Sansa.

Arya placed her pie down and moved to stand. “I’m ready to go now.”

“You’re not.” Jon’s tone darkened, her eating habits well in the forefront of his mind.

She turned to him, her glare indignant, but he stood firm. It was rare that he asserted authority over her, especially given that he never had any inside of these castle walls. But he would in this case. She was exhausted. The dark circles under her eyes were highlighted by the paleness of her skin, which was taunt against her bones. The fiery wildness of her youth was clouded by her need to eat and rest and bathe and be still.

He wouldn’t stop her from seeing their brother. He would never deny her that. But he was damn well going to see that she was taken care of.

“Finish your meal.” He added stiffly, making his way to the door leading to his chambers. “I’ll see to it that more is prepared for you when you return.”

Arya could only stare as the door closed firmly behind him.

Chapter 5

The steam from the hot springs was a welcome feeling as it mixed with the cold air of the North. Bran had never ventured out to the godswood much as a child, more interested in following his brothers and climbing the tops of Winterfell, learning all of her secrets. It was a shame he never paid much attention to the area with the heart tree nestled in its depths. The reds of the leaves and the carved face amongst the snow covered ground was a peaceful solitude that allowed for a clear mind, one he recently came to realize he needed.

It was where he knew he would be sought out, and waited patiently as his sisters made their way to him. He closed his eyes as he sightlessly watched them, honing in on Arya more than Sansa. He'd seen bits and pieces of her as he trained with the three-eyed raven, same as he had with his other siblings. His first image; he saw her bleeding with a sword in her hand before extinguishing a candle, afraid and determined as the room collapsed into darkness. When he saw her again, she was on a brown mare, looking out over the lands and warring with herself over whether to see her mission through or selfishly see her family.

Either way, she looked the same as she had then as she did standing before him now.

Arya and Sansa faced Bran in front of the heart tree, Sansa taking a subtle step back as her younger siblings shared a moment.

"You came home." He commented knowingly, almost surprising himself with the hint of a smile that pulled on his lips. Somewhere, Bran's memories and emotions flooded his insides, reminding him of a time when those were the only ones he ever possessed.

Arya moved forward to embrace him, her movements familiar, yet reserved. He had to hold in his amusement as his mind's eye witnessed her and Jon's earlier embrace, as the swirl of their past and present mingled together. If he still embodied Brandon Stark, he might have made a joke about it.

Coming back to himself, he decided on another topic as they pulled away from the embrace. He mentioned seeing her at the crossroads, and took in her shock the same as he had with Sansa and Jon when they had discovered his newfound abilities.

Arya gasped, her surprise and confusion prominent to both Bran and Sansa at the comment.

Bran could only hold her gaze as he mentioned, "I see a lot now."

Sansa stepped forward then, feeling the need to offer the explanation she wished she had been given at the revelation. She and Jon had been so elated when Bran returned to Winterfell, having believed him dead like the rest of their siblings. It had been a sweet reunion with embraces and tears from both of them. Only when she looked closer did she realize that Bran did not hold their same joy, and merely looked at them with the indifference of a long lost acquaintance. Her private conversation with him in the very place they stood added little clarity, but provided proof enough that what he said held validity.

She was not sure what he might have revealed to Jon, or if he said nothing at all. It didn't appear that he would offer more to Arya, and it took her a moment to come to the peculiar realization that the reason why was because Arya hadn't asked.

Regardless, she stepped in. "Bran can see things. Visions of the past and present."

"And much more than that." He added, turning his attention back to Arya, who was still stood in place. "I thought you would go back to Kings Landing, what with Cersei being on your list."

If Arya held any doubt about Bran's abilities, it disappeared with that comment.

"What list?" Sansa inquired, raising a delicate brow as she regarded the younger girl.

Arya chanced a look at her and muttered, "My list of people I'm going to kill."

Sansa's brow furrowed before she let a smirk escape, looking between them as she expected them to drop the obvious joke. It was clever, the façade they held. They almost succeeded in tricking her, and it brought a warmth to her as she recalled the tricks Arya used to play on her, regardless of how unappreciative she was of them at the time.

Arya let out a forced chuckle, looking to Bran to play along. Pointedly ignoring her, he held the same stoic expression as he informed, "It's not a joke. There are only a few others left. Cersei is one of them."

The laughter stopped abruptly, with Arya giving Bran a warning look. Glancing up at Sansa once more, she wasn't surprised to see the telltale signs of horror on her face.

Pain seized her chest as thoughts from earlier in the day came rushing back. Everything in her told her to deny it immediately. Because her worst fears were closing in on her now, threatening to come bubbling to the surface at the thought of Sansa running off to tell Jon of her dirty, murderous secrets. The very thought of him looking at her the way Sansa tried so hard not to would be a blow she wasn't quite sure she would ever recover from.

Her eyes bore into the clear blue of her sisters, pleading without words to understand. Hoping against history that she would not run to tell anyone of the horrible deeds she was capable of. Sansa broke the contact a moment later, averting her eyes and taking a half step back. Her face gave nothing away, her features schooled in a way that reminded Arya that the older girl had her own stories to tell. And from the sharpness of her gaze, it seemed that she was warring with the decision of whether to heed her plea or share what she'd learned.

For the first time, Arya wondered how close Jon and Sansa had become since they were reunited. Winterfell was no longer home to the familiar faces of their youth. Between her father's death and the Red Wedding, she suspected the Boltons had taken care of anyone else that may have still been left standing.

Jon and Sansa would have navigated these grounds on their own, bonding and grieving and rebuilding in ways they never had. It was them ruling Winterfell now- the two of them playing the political game in the name of the North. She and Bran had just arrived, both

having taken vastly different paths, but still viewed the same by the Tully blue eyes staring past them into the scenery beyond.

Sansa was dangerous when afraid, Arya remembered. Sansa was always afraid when they were younger. Afraid of getting in trouble, afraid of getting dirty, afraid of Septa Mordane's wrath, or a reprimanding look from their mother. Most of the time, telling on Arya pacified her, until the day in the clearing when Micah was cut and Arya threatened with a steel blade. That was the day Sansa's fear manifested into outright lying, and the day "justice" was served in the form of a punished direwolf pup and the death of her friend. She saw some of that fear in her eyes now, but instead of hyperventilating cries of Arya and Micah spoiling everything, it was her silence that was loudest of all.

What would Jon say, if Sansa told him of a killing list? Would he take her at her word, and believe her over Arya? Had their time at Winterfell together helped them forge a connection that was stronger than the one she and Jon shared?

Arya's lip trembled involuntarily, and she turned away from Sansa slowly. A glint of color caught her attention, and the blade Bran had been eying came into focus.

Sansa noticed it as well, and inquired about it.

"Littlefinger." He muttered.

Arya's lips curled. "Littlefinger? He's here?"

Sansa walked closer, announcing Littlefinger's declaration to House Stark, along with him having brought the soldiers of the Vale.

Arya shot the taller girl a look, confusion evident. Why would he have been there, declaring for the North, when last she saw he was sitting at a table forging some sort of deal with Tywin Lannister?

Multiple thoughts swarmed Arya's mind then, most of them centering around the man's motives for loyalty. Much time had passed since she was in the presence of the former master of coin, but had that been enough for a man as untrustworthy as him to change his ways? Why would the Vale follow orders from Littlefinger when her cousin Robert should have inherited?

She would ask Jon when she saw him later. And with him having "gifted" her brother a valyrian steel dagger, she would make sure to stay on her guard.

"I don't want it. It is wasted on me." He told them before holding it out to Arya.

She took it reverently, tenderly unsheathing and inspecting it. She glanced from it to Bran to see him staring at the weirwood behind her. The wind picked gently, whispering through her hair and across her face. She watched as Bran's eyes closed and a hint of a smile spread across his face. It left as fast as it came, leaving behind the almost blank look he'd been wearing once again.

Sansa stepped from underneath the tree towards Bran. "I believe we should head back. There is much that needs to be done to prepare for winter and our guests."

Arya nodded and re-sheathed the dagger to place it on her hip.

As Sansa began pushing Bran on the path back to the castle, he turned toward Arya with a serious expression.

"When you see Jon, tell him I need to speak with him."

Arya nodded her acquiescence, but inferred, "I thought you already saw Jon."

"Just when I arrived. He did not get to stay long." He sat back in his chair, bringing the wolf pelt higher on his lap. "I believe he may be keeping his distance. Tell him he needn't be afraid. All will be revealed soon."

Arya paused as Sansa continued to wheel him down the path. Glancing at her sister, she received a shrug in response. Whatever Bran had to talk to Jon about, Sansa didn't know either.

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Once they were inside again, Sansa escorted Bran back to his room before making her leave. There was a brief moment of tense silence as Sansa regarded Arya with barely concealed uncertainty. It was clear that the revelation of her list of names was still at the forefront of Sansa's mind.

Arya bit her lip through the exchange, forcing herself still. It took everything in her not to run to find Jon. She wondered where the sudden hesitation to see him came from, thinking back to even a couple of hours before when all she wanted was to be with him. Now, images of her and Sansa addressing the northern lords and sharing Bran's homecoming with one another left her trying to ignore the gnawing feeling of displacement in the place she always felt she belonged.

Stepping back into her chambers, his earlier comment came back with startling clarity when she saw another tray of food sat next to her bed, the steam from the freshly made bread and stew wafting through the room.

It was more food than she'd had in weeks, and she had no idea what to do. As hungry as she still was, the habit of eating quickly and saving for later was not one that would be easily broken. Too many days traveling with the brotherhood and with the Hound saw to that.

Shaking her head, she moved to a mirror at the far side of the room. She was still in the same clothes she arrived in, the material of her cloak feeling too heavy against her fatigued body. She shrugged it off slowly, letting it fall to the ground and looked at herself. She hadn't seen a clear reflection since she left the House of Black and White, and as she traced the taunt lines of her cheek bones and the too pale silhouette of her face, she began to understand Jon's earlier concern.

She dropped her hand from the mirror, instead tracing her hand down her shirt to hover above her right side. She shuddered to think what it must look like, the wounds from the waif still painful and not yet healed. It was easy to ignore here in the North, and the cold was yet another reason to be thankful for home. However, the cold wouldn't protect from the pain for long, and she vowed to ask for the new maester as soon as she was able. The exhaustion from traveling and walking the grounds finally took their toll, and it was with slow steps that she made her way to her bed to sit.

She eyed the food on the tray again and thought of Jon. There was no doubt he would check on her before retiring for the evening. Even with his duties, he would find time. The last thing she wanted after being away for so many years was to see disappointment on his face because he'd failed to make her feel better. And he would see it as a failure. His failure. She couldn't bear it.

So for him, she ate again.

Chapter 6

Arya's limbs twitched in her sleep as she dreamed.

She was running through the trees, the snow soft under her feet as they propelled her forward. The wind was howling loudly in her ears, and she could vaguely make out the front gates in the far distance. She didn't know where she was meant to be going, but her legs directed her still. The light in the sky was leaving, and the blood pumped faster through her veins. She knew now where she wanted to go, and who would await her there.

She stopped running and looked around, scanning the area. Trees surrounded her, and she moved under the cover of branches, keeping close to the trunks as she stalked. She sniffed the air, her nose wet and cold from the chill, but felt a jolt of excitement as she caught a familiar scent. Glancing behind her shoulder, she quickly searched the area before moving again, stalking her way forward slowly.

The world around her was quiet as she crept. No creatures with wings making sounds or manmade noises could be heard anywhere near her.

Suddenly, she heard a twig snap to her right, and she let out a teasing howl before sprinting forward.

It was time to play.

The wind was louder in her ears now, and the chill she felt on her nose earlier was thicker in the air, gently brushing over her skin through the softness that usually kept her warm. She caught a flash of white next to her, and blood red eyes staring her down as she continued to run. She remembered those eyes, and the scent she smelled in the trees was stronger now. She found him.

He chased her and nipped at her heels until they reached beyond the trees. They both stopped near the edge of the gate, where people didn't often visit, and circled each other. She sniffed the air again and huffed her acceptance as she smelled no fear coming from the other. Close enough now, she touched her nose to his, and did not growl when he nuzzled his face against hers.

The light in the sky was gone now, and she could see the big white circle that let her see better when she went hunting. Not now, though. It was time to rest. They would hunt when the circle rose higher.

Arya opened her eyes slowly, blinking several times to adjust to the dim light. She vaguely recalled her dream, but the details were fleeting, as they sometimes were. She knew she was seeing through Nymeria, and what she could remember brought a sleepy smile to her. She yawned and glanced around. The sun had gone down, and a fire had been lit, bathing her room in a soft, yet bright glow.

The flames' light danced around the corners of the room, enabling her to look around. Her room had been tidied while she slept, having succumbed to her exhaustion immediately after finishing the food Jon brought to her. The tray was no longer there, and the amount of furs that covered her were more than she had before.

Looking across the room, she saw that Needle was still perched where Jon left it, after Sansa had stepped in with Nymeria.

After asking her where she'd been. An answer she was still not sure she could provide for him.

Because what could she possibly tell him? How she saw father die and didn't do anything about it? How she worked for Tywin Lannister? How she went with the Hound and watched him kill, and committed the act herself? How she stood outside the door as mother and Robb and Grey Wind were being murdered? How she went to Braavos instead of the Night's Watch to be with him?

No, too much happened for her to be able to answer him, and too much was happening now for her to dwell on the past.

There was much to do now. The Northern lords, ladies and their armies littered the grounds of Winterfell, filling in all available space within the castle. She suspected resources were scarce, but she had no idea what was going on other than the end of the Bolton's claim to Winterfell and what she had overheard in the hall. Jon mentioned the white walkers. The ones Old Nan used to tell them stories about. What did he mean when he said they were coming?

She shook her head and pulled the furs off of herself to stand up. She walked toward the window to see the moon high in the sky, a clear indication of how late it was. Still dressed in her clothes, she contemplated taking a walk around the grounds, but stopped as she noticed the door connecting her room to Jon's was slightly ajar.

She warred with herself, even as her feet carried her in his direction, whether she should go inside. Had the years not passed, there would be no hesitation. She remembered fondly times when she would startle him awake by jumping on his bed in the middle of the night, or climb in next to him after a nightmare, clinging to him as his soothing voice chased the fear away. There were times, especially in Braavos, when she dreamed of those moments. Those dreams were what got her through some of the more difficult times in her training.

But, years had passed, and they weren't the same anymore. Would he still welcome her? Should she even still have the desire to be close to him?

Clenching her fists, she glanced in through the open door. The fire light was dim in his room, but she could make out his figure under the furs on the bed. The soft rising and falling of his chest was visible, and she felt at peace with just witnessing that rhythm.

It was sheer willpower that allowed her to turn away from his room and leave him be. Maybe one day, she would feel worthy to enter his chambers as she used to. But it was not that day.

As she slowly walked away, a hiss escaped as the fabric of her shirt inadvertently irritated her wound. She could feel that the bandage had shifted, removing the buffer that protected it from the too harsh feel of her clothing.

Despite the time that passed during her travel from Braavos back to the North, the wounds were still slow healing. Fighting the urge to press her hand against it, she glanced out the window again and breathed deeply.

She wasn't sure who the maester of Winterfell was now, but that was who she needed to see. Through the cover of night, she knew she could walk the grounds undetected and avoid the prying eyes of the castle dwellers and her siblings. Jon and Sansa would never have to know of her injuries.

Making up her mind, she took a cautious step forward toward the door, testing out the pressure. Once she reached outside, the cold would numb the pain, just as it had before. Until then, she grit her teeth and continued on.

Maester Wolkan awoke to the sound of soft knocking at his chambers. He had just retired a few hours before, having spent his time seeing to Lady Stark's orders, and his remaining time glancing through Maester Luwin's archives in attempts to better understand how to serve the current Lord and Lady of Winterfell.

Coming from the Bolton's rule to the Starks was one the older man could honestly say was the best outcome, both for himself and every other person who had to serve at the hands of the tyrant. He hadn't known what to expect after the Battle of the Bastards, but he learned from years of research and service never to expect anything. Every noble rule was so different, yet all the same. The main difference he looked for, was whether or not the rule was effective. Roose, and later Ramsey Bolton's rules were ones filled with horrific villainy and the utmost disregard for anyone other than themselves and their legacy. He'd read of many men and wars lost due to that same mentality; the deistic mindset taking over to the point where they believe in their own invincibility, and convince those around them of it as well. It had been written throughout history so much, especially Aerys Targaryan, that it was not difficult to anticipate how it would end. For certain men, demise was inevitable. One only had to look at recent events to see that.

As Wolkan made his way to the door, dressing quickly in something more suitable for company as he went, he thought of the Starks, the current Lord- no, King- and Lady he currently served under. He saw the trust the two had in each other, and saw how that trust was currently helping them prepare for what was to come.

He had been there when Lady Sansa was married to Lord Bolton, and he could only imagine the unspeakable things she had to endure under the man. He'd been horrified at the way Lord Ramsey had treated his most trusted girl, and how she met her demise was not in a way even she deserved, despite how cruel she could be.

Someone like Lady Stark would have never survived under him for long, and he had to admit that he was relieved when she escaped.

Seeing her in her current position after what she went through, and seeing how she still retained kindness gave him some hope back that he lost during his servitude with the Boltons.

And Jon Snow, the King of the North. Well, he had been gaining a reputation for years that was hard to ignore. Youngest commander of the Night's Watch, dying and being brought back to life, those were whispers that could hardly be ignored. And listening to him speak of the white walkers and the long night made the man believe that the young man being hailed as king had seen more than his fair share of terrors.

Even still, he could see that Jon Snow was a man of honor, in the way he treated his men as well as his family. He had the temperament of his late father, Lord Eddard Stark, that much was certainly clear.

He lit a candle at the door before opening it, begging his guest's pardon at the short wait before seeing who was at the other side. His eyes went wide as he looked at the youngest Lady Stark, and immediately moved to the side and beckoned her in.

"What is it that I can do for you, my lady? Is there something the matter?" He asked, bowing slightly.

He watched as she looked around, her gaze drifting from the desk in the corner to the numerous tomes and scrolls that lay across the shelves. Her eyes had a far off look in them, as if she were seeing into another time.

From what King Jon mentioned to him, the young Lady Stark had shown up on the grounds that afternoon after the council meeting. He had not gotten the opportunity to be formally introduced to her, and she was not present at dinner. However, looking at her dark hair and gray eyes, the resemblance to the king was clear, and it was with an educated guess that he greeted her as he had.

Allowing her a moment, he turned around to put more wood on the fire, and was surprised to see she had closed the distance between the door and the middle of the room in that short time.

He gasped. "My apologies, my lady, I was startled."

He didn't know how to react to the small smirk she let show at the comment.

"Forgive me, maester..." She hesitated, and he quickly filled in his name. After thanking him, he saw her glance toward the door to his chambers. "I realize it's late."

"No apologies necessary, Lady Stark. It is no imposition." He replied with utmost sincerity, hoping to put her at ease.

She nodded, and took a seat in the chair he motioned to near the fire, sitting as gingerly as she could, a movement Wolkan noticed right away.

"Are you injured, my lady?" He asked as he knelt in front of her. His first instinct was to inspect her legs, see if there was any visible tearing on the fabric or any blood. Finding none,

he stood as he waited for her answer.

“I am, but it is not something I want Jon and Sansa to know about. Will you tell them I was here?”

Wolkan shook his head, “Not if you do not wish it, my lady.”

“I’m not a lady.” She gently admonished. “Please, call me Arya.”

“As you wish, my l-.” He paused, and she let a smirk escape again. That seemed to ease any foreign tension between them.

He cleared his throat to conceal his embarrassment before asking again, “What seems to trouble you?”

Contemplating her next move, it took her a moment before she reached her hands down to lift her shift from her pants. She bit her lip with the motion, feeling the pain shoot from the spot where the bandage should have been.

Maester Wolkan moved closer to get a better look, glad he thought to feed the fire as it allowed him the light he needed to see the deep stab marks on her skin and the haphazard wrap that surrounded her torso.

Arya waited, breathing shallow as he inspected her. After what felt like too long, he finally raised back up.

“These wounds are deep and aged, and they haven’t had the chance to heal as they should. A mild infection may be what is causing the discomfort. I’ll clean them and re-bandage. The cleaning will be the most painful part, I’m afraid, but that is to be expected. I’ll prepare some milk of the poppy. You should be able to sleep soundly after that.”

He moved to a shelf with ingredients and began pulling out bowls and cloths.

Arya nodded, relief settling in that the injury would be taken care of and that the maester was discrete in not asking her about how she came to acquire it.

The stabs represented more than just physical wounds, and they were an impediment when it came to her being able to move. With maester Wolkan’s help, it may be only a short time until she could begin to train again.

Until then, she would have to wait, and use that time to find out what was happening in the North, Littlefinger’s motives, and what Jon meant about the white walkers.

Chapter 7

The next few days passed in a sort of routine, in some ways. After her visit with maester Wolkan, Arya was given orders to visit him each evening to continue ridding her wounds of the infection. She would return to her room after each visit with the door leading to Jon's room closed, and awaken to it partially opened. She tried to stay awake at times, but the herbs or milk of the poppy the maester gave her would have her succumb to sleep before she could see the door open.

It was frustrating for multiple reasons. Living on her own for as long as she had, she'd become a very light sleeper. Whether from faint rays of sunlight in darkened rooms to the pitter-patter of mice on the Braavosi streets, her eyes would jolt open from the smallest of incentives. It was the only way she was able to survive as long as she had. Not hearing a door open, or the creak of footsteps in such close proximity to her was disheartening. She was trained by the faceless men to sense movement and she was blind for months; small doses of milk of the poppy should not have caused her not to hear him in the room beside her.

Whether it had to do with her feeling safe for the first time since leaving Winterfell, or that her brother was the one on the other side of the door didn't matter. Just the thought of being caught off guard had her itching to go out into the yard and challenge the first soldier she could find.

She quickly dismissed the idea after a few moments. She had much to accomplish before she was able to fight again.

She hadn't spoken to Jon since that first day, but it was as much her doing as it was his, she assumed. As much as she thought of visiting him, the moment any opportunity presented itself, her hands would sweat and she would flee. And afterward, after chastising herself and realizing just how much she wanted to talk to him, he would disappear just as quickly as she had, and she would not see him again until the next morning when she would peak into his open door.

As much as that was on her mind, there were more important things she was worried about. Sansa had been walking the grounds with the maester and master of arms. Arya was always nearby, but never moved to join her sister. Instead, her focus was on the former master of coin that was constantly trailing behind her.

Littlefinger was not to be trusted. If she'd learned anything from her father and brother's deaths, it was that life was not promised to honorable men. Dishonorable men, however, not only lived, but thrived.

It was why Tywin Lannister was able to take her under his protection, and the reason why Littlefinger sat across the table from him those years ago. Whatever they were talking about, it was not honorable. And though Tywin met his demise, Littlefinger being alive and trailing her sister set a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. She would keep an eye on him, as well as on those he watched when he thought no one saw.

Aside from Littlefinger, there was also the matter of the white walkers. When maester Wolkan told her what was happening one night during her treatment, Arya almost couldn't believe it. Had it not been for the things she'd seen, she would have had a much harder time coming to fully trust it. But there were stories, and he said Jon had seen them and fought them and they were making their way south.

No wonder Jon was so worked up. He had every right to be.

It was with these thoughts that Arya made her way to the heart tree. She had been walking the grounds all day, observing the goings on and hoping for a glimpse of her big brother while the lie of wanting to avoid him kept clawing through her mind. Jon had been holed up in the hall most of the day meeting with his council. She had seen Sansa and Littlefinger go in and out on more than one occasion. Instead of questioning it, or walking in to join, she turned away and moved in another direction.

She wasn't surprised to see Bran sitting in front of the tree, a far off look on his face as he stared at the red leaves. Her breath caught, and for a second, she thought of father. The expression was so reminiscent; a weary look of one who had seen more than the years should have allowed.

Bran looked so different with that look, and in that moment, every fiber of her wanted to know more about her brother and what he'd done all of the years they were separated.

She walked up to him with slow steps, only stopping when her hand reached out to touch his shoulder. They were right beneath the leaves, and the dark grey clouds above whispered of an inevitable storm.

"What are you thinking?" She asked, never taking her eyes from the tree's face.

"I was waiting for you." He answered, and turned to face her fully as her eyes danced in his direction.

"You can see the future?" She wondered, remembering back to that first conversation in that same spot days before.

"No." He shook his head and again moved his attention back to the carved trunk. "Just when you began walking in this direction."

She hummed as she allowed her legs to carry her to the base of the tree. Leaning back, she settled into the smooth bark and let out a sigh when she felt the coolness of the surface seep through the opening of her wolf pelt to her injured side.

If Bran noticed her reaction, he didn't comment. Instead, he alleged, "I did see you another time, though." He squinted his eyes, his expression one of contemplation. "Or, I thought I had."

Arya bent over, picking up a small stick that stuck up from the snow covered ground. Dusting it off, she asked, "What do you mean? Where did you see me?" The unasked question of 'how?' was one that she was still training herself not to ask.

“Here.” He gestured behind her, to a clearing several feet away. “But, it wasn’t you. I think it may have been aunt Lyanna.”

“Aunt Lyanna?” She looked thoughtful. The name brought up a lot of emotions for their family, especially her. She was always told by her father how much she reminded him of her. This time, she couldn’t help but ask, “How did you see her? How do you know it wasn’t me?”

Bran smiled. “She and a boy were sword fighting, and she was doing well. I thought it was the two of us play fighting, like we used to. But, watching further, I know it wasn’t you.” A breathy laugh left him as he commented, “It couldn’t have been. You never beat me in sword fights.”

Arya gasped, an indignant look plastered on her face, and Bran’s smile grew wider. The stick that Arya held was soon tossed in his lap, and it was his last words that had her rummaging through the snow covered grounds searching for another stick.

As she searched, she told him. “You’re right, I never could beat you in swords when we were little.” She pulled a stick from the snow and examined it before almost immediately tossing it back down. “But, I’ve been practicing with a sword since I was in King’s Landing, and I bet I could beat you now.”

“Oh really?” He asked, twirling the stick around between his fingers. “And what makes you think I haven’t been practicing?”

She smirked. “Seems like you’ve been pretty occupied, ‘seeing things’ and whatnot. Doesn’t give you a lot of time to focus on your sword work, or your archery for that matter.” Spotting another stick, she bent down to pick it up. “Because, if I remember, you never did beat me at archery.” She replied in the same tone he’d made his initial statement, and his eyebrows rose at the obvious challenge.

“So...” She stalked toward him, the newest stick heavy in her hand as she spun it with the same precision as if it were a sword. “Care to test which of us has practiced the most?”

As she waited for his answer, she didn’t think she had ever seen so many expressions on her brother’s face. There were so many that not all could possibly be his own. It was fascinating and terrifying, and brought her back to her first moments in the hall of faces, and of seeing her emotions play out on the features of others, and how- if she lost control- those emotions could stay with her even after the face was off.

It wasn’t long before he answered, but his eyes had gone unfocused, and his upper body shivered so briefly that it would have been regarded as a chill of the weather before all traces of it disappeared and she was left with *Bran*.

And in that moment, the brother she saw before she asked the question and the one looking at her now were so different. There was a light in his eyes now, one that sparkled with mischief and adventure just like they had last time they saw each other.

She wanted to ask what was going on, *where he had been* , because the Bran she had grown to know since coming back was not the brother she knew, but there was no point dwelling on it right then. What she knew in that moment was he was there, solid and breathing, and it was more than she could have hoped for.

He began to grin, his cheeks gaining color, and with a hard gaze and a flex of his hands he said, "Let's see."

Raising the stick high in the air, he used his free hand to wheel himself closer to her in attack.

Though his speed wasn't quick, her surprise at the action had her step backwards, the heart tree the only separation between the two. Once she got over her shock, she raised her stick and charged at him, a smile plastered on her face.

A couple of minutes into the fight, Arya thought she felt another presence in the clearing with them. Parrying one of Bran's attacks, she allowed her eyes to roam subtly, checking around the clearing for any signs of who was with them. As she gained the upper hand and circled behind Bran, she couldn't help a worry in the pit of her stomach that- if there was someone there- they may not be friendly.

She had left Braavos barely alive, having fought the waif with the last of her strength, and stealing faces from the House of Black and White. She thought of her bag- the one she had left on the mare she had ridden in to Winterfell on- and knew she would need to retrieve it soon before any of the stable hands went searching through it. Something told her she would need to keep the bag close.

It was possible, that someone may have followed her. Her senses were sharp, but traveling that long of a distance injured could have dulled them to a point that someone stealthy enough would have no issue tracking her.

And there were none that excelled in that talent better than the faceless men.

Her head swiveled around faster now, and her heart hammered in her chest as she concentrated less on the game and more on the snowy grounds. All around, all she saw were the snow covered trees and the steam of the hot springs in the distance. If there was someone there, she would have seen a sign of them.

While her focus was elsewhere, Bran was also losing himself in a different way. Their sticks still clashed, but with less fervor until both of them dropped them altogether and were still. Arya breathed deeply, allowing herself to recover from the fatigue. Her palms were sweaty as she brought them close to her ears, straining to hear any unusual sounds in the too quiet godswood.

Her gaze shifted back to Bran quickly in her sweep of the area, a surprised sound escaping her lips. Bran was sitting in the chair with hands clenching the pelt in his lap, his eyes a silver gray that she had never seen before. His mouth was hanging slightly open, and the silver gray bore into hers so intensely that they looked through her.

“Bran?” She gasped out, frightened, and not sure whether to move closer or farther away. She settled on closer, and her hand reflexively gravitated to Needle.

It was only a few seconds longer before the silver grey returned to his normal eye color, and the far off look from earlier returned. His face was slack now, no longer showing the smile. The game they had engaged in was over and, somehow, she knew her little brother was gone again, replaced now by the person he had now become.

Bran moved his head from side to side, and his expression was almost confused as he stretched his hands out, gently rubbing the palm of the one that previously propelled his chair through the snow during their duel.

Arya called out to him again, her voice a little lower now. This time, Bran answered her, and she asked if he was alright.

“I am. My fingers hurt, though.” He flexed again, his eyes following the wheel tracks that circled the area.

She moved close to him again. “What happened? What was that?”

His eyes squinted again, disoriented by what he’d experienced. He brought a hand to his head and closed his eyes. “I lost myself for a moment.” He replied.

Seeming to come back to himself, he regarded her as he lay his hands in his lap.

“Have you given my message to Jon yet?” He asked suddenly. “To come see me. I have news for him that he needs to hear.”

“He hasn’t come to see you?” She asked, thinking how out of character that was for Jon. No matter how busy he was, he would always make time for his siblings if they needed him. And, considering Bran’s condition, there was no way Jon wouldn’t prioritize going to see to him, even if the white walkers were coming up to the gates.

“Not yet.” He shook his head, but seemed unbothered by situation. Instead, he gazed at the tree again and repeated, “If you see him, please let him know I wish to speak to him. I have news I believe he needs to know.”

Arya walked around, her back to the forest around her, but her stance no less relaxed than before. Still, she couldn’t help but ask, “What news?”

She saw him smile out of the corner of her eye, but he never turned away from the tree. “I’m sure he will tell you, when the time comes.”

Arya could only nod, confused by his words, but not wanting to press for more information.

Part of her wondered if Jon would tell her of the news when he found out, whatever it was. She hated being so close to him and not speaking to him. It was a pain that made her heart hurt, knowing that she was part of the reason they hadn’t interacted. She hadn’t even seen him at meals, opting to take them in her chambers or with some of the ally soldiers at the tables as far away from her family as possible.

There was still so much going on in her head, and she wasn't sure she knew down from up at times. It had been so long, and so much had happened. She needed to worry about her family first. She needed to keep an eye on Littlefinger. She wanted to heal quickly so she could help train those that wanted to help fight for Jon when the threat came. She wanted to talk to Sansa, see what role she should play in running Winterfell. They were responsibilities that were expected of her, and she felt a compelling sense of duty to help Jon and Sansa in that moment.

But there were other things she needed, things she was so desperate to do that her chest ached from the thought of it. She wanted to talk to Sansa about father, and cry and yell and scream at her for why she didn't try harder to save his life. She wanted to ask where Rickon was, because no one had mentioned their little brother or Shaggydog yet and she was losing hope with every passing day that he was still alive. She wanted to talk to them about Robb and mother, and beg them to forgive her for not stopping the wedding, and not fighting the Hound's hold when he carried her away from the slaughter that night. And father...she wanted to talk to father, to see him in the crypts. To lay eyes on his image and finally talk to him again.

She needed to be alone with Jon. To see him and touch his face again and convince herself that he was real and with her.

So much needed to be done, and her head pounded at the thought of doing any of it.

As she left Bran to return to the castle, she wondered how long it would be before she began to shatter.

Chapter 8

Jon let out a heavy sigh as the northern lords and ladies exited the hall. It was yet another meeting of preparation for the imminent attack of the white walkers, and he was growing increasingly restless. He didn't know how to make them understand the danger they were all in. They had no idea what the white walkers were like, most having only heard the childhood tales from maesters or the Old Nans of the world.

It brought dread to Jon every time he thought of the army of the dead, and there still wasn't a night where he wasn't kept up by the threat, and the realization of just how ill prepared they would be if the Night King made his way to the castle.

They were running out of time, precious time that should be used training, gathering supplies and forging weapons. Instead, meetings to discuss strategy were overtaken by topics that made him want to rip his hair out.

As King, Jon considered every issue brought to his attention as important, whether it be about political inquiries or squabbling neighbors. It was what he had seen his father do all his life, and it was a value he vowed to uphold. But, at the time, he could not bring himself to go into deep discussions regarding any living person when there was so much at stake.

The Umbers and the Karstarks renewed loyalty to House Stark was a win for the North, despite how Sansa and some of the other lords viewed the decision. Jon understood where Sansa was coming from in her views, and she was not wrong. The houses that came to their aide to fight the Battle of the Bastards were few, and the battle would not have had the fruitful outcome it had if not for their support. Those who fought deserved to be rewarded, but the only worthwhile reward Jon could think of was for them to live to see their families and their loved ones again. And they couldn't do that if the topics of conversation kept diverging into political discussions, which was what he had just dismissed them from.

As Jon looked around the emptying hall, he wished that Arya was beside him. He hadn't seen her in days and he needed her in the meetings, if for no other reason than to be in her presence. She would understand him, would understand the urgency in which they needed to move. She would hear what he was trying to convey to the other houses more clearly than anyone there, and probably be able to articulate his thoughts better than he could.

But he was a coward. A coward crowned King in the North. If he wasn't, he would be able to go to her without feeling his heart race with the anxiety of her rejection. Would be able to look her in the face and tell her how frightened he was of everything. If he were brave, he would have knocked on her chamber door days ago and asked where she disappeared to every night, and why she chose not to sit with the family at meals.

He needed her support now, more than he ever had. He was in a position of power now, a power he never asked for, and he didn't know what he was doing, only that he needed to do something.

Arya understood. She always understood, and peppered his face with kisses on his worse days. As miserable as he might have been at times in his youth, he would not hesitate to go back and experience it all again if it meant being comforted by her.

Leadership was a heavy responsibility, which was why it was even more imperative that he do his best for the people depending on him. After receiving Sam's letter from the Citadel, he and Ser Davos had been making rapid plans for the possibility of traveling to Dragonstone, and everything that decision would entail.

Daenerys Targaryan made her intentions clear when extending the invitation. He would have to bend the knee if he wanted any hope of gathering the dragonglass for the upcoming war. He would have to make a decision that would affect every man, woman and child in the castle, as well as the others in the North. He would be forfeiting their right to freedom and choice, and would be subjecting them to the whims of someone they barely knew by name alone. It was a heavy decision, and an even heavier burden.

Jon turned to look at Sansa, who stood shortly after he had. She regarded him with a look, blue eyes burning into his. She stayed mostly silent during the meeting, but Jon caught sight of her hands twisting at the fabric of her cloak each time there was a tense moment.

Jon let out a heavy breath and inclined his head toward the exit, signaling her to walk ahead of him out of the room. It was clear that she had something to say to him, things she'd likely wanted to say in the presence of the houses as everyone conversed. She'd stayed silent, however, not uttering a single word other than soft hums during certain topics. He could only guess the things going through her mind, and suspected it would only be a matter of time before she made them known. Better for her to speak on them now.

As he and Sansa walked toward their chambers, Jon's eyes roamed the grounds. On the bridge, he glanced down in the yard to see the master of arms surrounded by a group of fifteen or so, raising a training sword in his hand and swinging it methodically through the air, his movements slow enough that their eyes could follow the exact trajectory as he aimed. A few feet away were Brienne and Podrick, who looked to be occupied in a sparring match of their own. John couldn't help but smirk as some of the younger pupils of the master of arms' group had their attention diverted by the enthralling battle next to them.

The group consisted of about four or five women, and his heart felt lighter, knowing that the lords were taking his words to heart, as much as it pained some to ever even think of their girls with swords or shields in their hands.

In that moment, he couldn't help but seek out dark hair and gray eyes in the crowd. Arya would be the first in line to train in combat, if father allowed it. Her face always lit up any time she got to be in the training yard with them, even if for only a brief moment as she was hiding or being chased by Septa Mordane.

She belonged there, on the training grounds teaching the younger children some of the basics. If she'd carried around Needle as she'd alluded, it would be a real help having her there.

But she wasn't around. Not for council meetings, not for breaking the fast, and not even in her chambers in the evenings, and he was worried.

Is she avoiding me? He questioned, his heart heavy with doubt. *Have I done something?*

His mind replayed their last conversation, the day of her arrival, where his eyes bore into hers and asked a question he knew she wasn't ready to answer. When he returned to her later that first evening, she was asleep, and he got his first unguarded look at her since their separation.

He'd covered her with the fur from her bed and had retrieved another from his room in case she needed it. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and watched her. He sat there for what could have been hours or minutes, and only looked away when a servant came to light the fires for the night. He'd left reluctantly then, with the intention of visiting in the morning and escorting her to break their fast. She had been gone by the time he'd knocked on the door, and he'd barely seen her since.

Jon felt the winter breeze still around him as he rounded the corner of the tower where their rooms were, and his thoughts left him as he focused on Sansa once more. Once they neared his chambers, he was surprised when she continued past, her skirts sweeping the ground and the heels of her boots holding a quick rhythm in her brisk pace toward her chambers at the far end. They still had not spoken a single word during their walk, and it was obvious that whatever she had to say, she wanted it said without any threat of interruption.

Entering her room, Jon closed the door behind them and leaned against the cool wood, taking the time to glance around the still unfamiliar territory. The children were hardly allowed in father's chambers, he less so than anyone. He'd only remembered entering the room once when he was a boy of seven, after having cut himself after he and Robb had taken two of the real swords from the yard and started fighting with them. He had only gotten as far as he stood now, the blood dripping from his arm in a trickle on the ground before Lady Catelyn's disgusted gasp of horror alerted father and he carried him from the room to Maester Luwin.

Glancing down, his eyes swept the floor to see if there was any trace of a stain. He remembered there being so much blood, probably more than there actually was, but he still squinted his eyes and strained to see any remnants of it.

He raised his head at the sound of Sansa draping her fur pelt over a stool, and he took the moment to look around. The interior itself had not changed, but the room, for as intimidating as it had been to his young eyes, looked small now, and Sansa's tall form standing near the window made the space even smaller.

Sighing, he rubbed his hand across his chin and took a step forward. "What's going on?"

Sansa stared out of the window, her expression growing harsh. She turned her lips up humorlessly and turned to regard him. "You need to talk to her now."

He didn't need her to elaborate on who exactly she was referring to.

"What do you mean?"

Sansa rolled her eyes as she crossed her arms. "I understand that she had a hard journey home, but it has been almost a fortnight." She moved away to stand in front of the fireplace instead, where the sigil for House Stark was proudly displayed on the wall above. "She needs

to be present when we address the Northern houses. What kind of message do you think it sends if only some Starks deem it necessary to attend to our allies?"

Jon visibly tensed and he couldn't help but bristle slightly at the question, the defense of Arya escaping his lips without thought. "Why only her? Interesting how she is the one sending the wrong message when you've mentioned nothing of Bran."

She frowned. "Bran is remembered by some as the previous lord of Winterfell after Robb left, and he is at least present at the godswood or around the grounds. He may not be as visible as I'd like, but at least he is seen. She's isn't, and it could be considered insulting to those who've declared for House Stark that one of the Starks does not make an effort to be in their presence."

"Not as visible as you'd like?" He repeated. "If the lords and ladies of the North have taken issue with Arya and Bran not being present, why have they not spoken about it directly?"

She shook her head, her tone low as she moved slowly back to the desk. Her expression was thoughtful as she replied, "I don't know, but there have been whispers about it."

"Whispers?" He asked skeptically, stepping forward. "From Littlefinger? Has he been the one feeding you this information? Is that where all of this is coming from? You know he isn't trustworthy."

Sansa shook her head, but refused to meet his eyes. Instead, she busied herself with sorting through raven scrolls on the desk. "As much as he is untrustworthy, he does seem to have uncanny insight at times. He wouldn't have retained the title of master of coin and close to Cersei if he didn't have some wits about him."

"So you trust his words? Over your own sister?"

She quickly looked up, almost scandalized by the accusation. He was across the room in only a few strides and only stopped when his hand was within reach of hers. Her fingers stilled when he lay his hand atop hers, her eyes meeting his.

"You asked me if it would be so terrible to listen to you, when I asked you how to be smarter." He spoke lowly, holding her hand firmly. "Do you really think listening to the man who married you to...to that monster Ramsey Bolton is the smarter option? When it comes to Arya and our family?"

It took her a moment to respond. "This isn't the same thing, Jon."

"Isn't it?" He removed his hand and backed away. "Because I think it's exactly the same thing. It starts with him claiming whispers about the disappearance of our sister, and who knows what that will turn into."

He paced away again, wiping a hand across his face in frustration.

"There is already dissension in our ranks, Sansa. If that's not enough, we have the white walkers nearly at our gates and not one, but two proclaimed queens demanding that I come

and bend the knee for the North.”

Sansa bit her lip, but her gaze held his as he pivoted back and leaned in close again.

His voice was low as he asked, “You tell me which you would prioritize if you were in my position: the dead, the queen, the dragon queen, or the whispers from a man who has given me no reason at all to trust him?”

Her tone was sober as she tried to soothe his nerves. “I understand, Jon. I do.”

“I’m sensing that ‘but’ again.” He muttered, alluding to their conversation on the bridge when he’d enlightened her to father’s saying.

She ignored him. “But, we have given Arya more than enough time to settle in. Much more than Bran needed, and he looked way worse for wear.”

“Do you not remember what she looked like when she got here? How starved and pale she was? How she had nothing to her name but a horse and a sword?” His voice elevated with each question, and he had to take a step back.

He wiped his face and turned his back to her, taking in a couple deep breaths. He heard movement behind him, but held a hand up to still her from coming closer.

After a moment, he pivoted to face her again. She had stepped back to the window.

“If you don’t want to talk to her, I will.” She told him with finality.

“And say what, Sansa?” He demanded, his voice tired and hoarse.

“She is a Stark, Jon, regardless of what she’s been through. Bran is a Stark, I am a Stark and Arya *is a Stark*. The Northern houses put their trust and loyalty into our house, as they have since before you, before Robb and before father and grandfather. They look to us, Jon, and our alliances are precarious as it is with some. They are losing faith in our abilities with every speech from you about the Night King, and I believe in you, I really do, but you have to see what it looks like from their point of view.”

Her features softened as she regarded him fully, her expression pleading him to listen. “We lost father, Robb and Rickon. We only have the four of us left. Bran is not the same as he once was, but he has a presence here. She needs one, too.”

“Well, I don’t agree. And you can say whatever you’d like, but I won’t force her to do what she doesn’t wish to.”

Wearied from the conversation, he was about to take his leave. He was only mildly surprised when Sansa walked past him in that direction. Her strides were as purposeful as they were when they’d arrived, and the emotions she was so open with seconds ago were replaced with a schooled expression.

The conversation had been long enough, and if they continued, he was almost certain it would lead to unnecessary contention between them.

“We’re on the same side, Jon. She has to start acting like she belongs here. They both do.”

He turned away and bit his lip to keep from responding.

“And don’t think for a second I don’t already know that you’d rather her be sitting beside you instead of me.”

He turned on his heel, her name on his lips, but he was met with the closed door.

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