

I'd Risk a Lifetime (For Another Second with You)

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I'd Risk a Lifetime (For Another Second with You)

by [stumpy.y](#)

Summary

The idea comes from a prompt I received on Tumblr.

Sansa receives a letter from her future self before King Robert arrives at Winterfell and her entire world view is changed.

Notes

This was such a great prompt that I might write a sequel.

Disclaimer: I do not own the characters, they belong to their respective owners, George R R Martin and HBO.

Enjoy!

Chapter 1

Sansa's day started out very strangely, even before the sun completely emerged from below the horizon. Lady, her newly found direwolf cub was abnormally restless that morning and firmly refused to follow any of Sansa's commands. On Lady's insistence, Sansa reluctantly left her bed early and dressed hastily before following her wolf companion to the origin of the cub's distress.

The moment they reached the courtyard, the direwolf broke out into a sprint towards the Godswood and Sansa struggled to keep up. When Sansa finally caught up, Lady was already busy digging the ground below a weirwood tree with a ferocity that she never observed in her cub before that day.

Oh no, thought Sansa, perhaps Lady is going to turn out as wild as the others.

Sansa realised that the she-wolf found whatever she was digging for the moment Lady stepped away politely to the side to let Sansa have a look at what was hidden below the ground. The hole was impressively deep and you could see the white roots speckled with loose bits of the earth. It didn't take long for Sansa to spot an unusually cubic root formation with the shape and size of a jewellery box.

Although it looked like it had been placed in there and then covered up, upon closer inspection Sansa could see that the container was fused perfectly with the surrounding roots and it looked like the only way of opening it was to break it off from its surroundings.

The roots gave way easily, much to Sansa's surprise, but left her hands covered in the weirwood's blood-red sap. Upon looking at the box more closely, Sansa noticed an indentation running along the perimeter that marked the lid of the strange object.

Prying it open required more effort than removing the whole contraption, but Sansa eventually managed to get the contents out. A single letter consisting of multiple pages.

How peculiar, maybe this is a message from the Old Gods, she wondered. Sansa did not often pray to the Old Gods, preferring to worship the Seven instead, like her mother. Hence, it felt odd that she was receiving such attention from them when it was never properly reciprocated on her part.

Sansa barely managed to take a look at the letter to confirm that it was indeed addressed to her before she heard the bells of Winterfell's sept ring seven times in the distance. The keep was waking up and soon it would be time for Sansa to break her fast with the rest of her family before joining Arya for their lessons with Septa Mordane.

Sansa had to make haste if she didn't want anyone to notice that she was gone. Glancing around the Godswood, Sansa realised with horror that she had made a mess of her ancestor's holy place. With Lady's help, she filled the gaping pit in the ground and washed off as much sap as she could from her hands in the nearby pond. Feeling breathless and elated, Sansa

stuffed the letter into her breast pocket and hurried back towards the castle, Lady followed suit.

The wait was pure agony. Sansa found that it was much harder to work at her embroidery for hours on end when curiosity burned her chest in the place where she put the letter. Her lessons felt endless and unusually boring. It did not help that she was sent to change half way through because Septa Mordane spotted the crimson stains from the weirwood sap that Sansa failed to notice through all the excitement of her morning.

“That is not the way a proper Lady should look,” her septa scolded, “I expect better of you, Sansa.”

The criticism made Sansa feel slightly bitter because Sansa took pride in being a perfect Lady. However, the painful impression of the cutting remark was soothed by the warm presence of the message that still guarded her heart.

It was already past nightfall by the time Sansa got a room to herself. She feigned a headache in order to retire early from supper. Knowing that her mother would be worried about her, Sansa willed herself to lie in her bed just until Catelyn checked up on her. She shut her eyes hard when she heard the door creak open, a thousand possibilities of what the letter could contain danced around in her head.

After her mother left, pleased to find her daughter sleeping, Sansa counted to fifty before she got up to light a candle. Lady, who was previously resting peacefully beside her bed sprung up with newfound energy.

The paper looked curiously fresh despite the fact that Sansa found the letter amongst the thicker, older roots of the weirwood. It was time. With a deep breath, Sansa broke the seal of her own house and opened up the pages.

Dear Sansa,

I hope that this letter finds you before it is too late. I am afraid that I do not even know where to begin and how to prove the things I am about to disclose. You see, you and I are one. Only you are the version of me that is still young and carefree. Please cherish those moments, I hope what you are about to read will let the course of your happiness run longer than mine.

This was unbelievable beyond words. Perhaps Arya decided to play a cruel joke on her with this business. But then again, how could Arya place the letter where Sansa found it? She read on.

It is very important that you do not disclose the contents of this letter to anyone, please ensure that it is burned the moment you finish reading it. Maybe you have heard that King

Robert is travelling North to meet your Father. If you haven't, you will soon, and I hope that when you do, you will believe this letter too. King Robert is going to ask your father to become Hand of the King, father will accept and this decision will start an avalanche of tragedy in our family that will eventually claim the lives of our father, our mother, Robb and Rickon.

Sansa felt tears welling up in her eyes. How could this be? How did this letter get to her? As a Lady of a Great House, Sansa always thought that her life was practically destined to be special, exceptional. As she read her own swirly, measured script she felt devastatingly powerless.

I ask a lot of you, Sansa, more so that I thought I could shoulder when I was, well, you (this all feels strange to me too, believe me). After I left Winterfell I discovered that I was made of stronger steel than I ever thought possible and I know now that it must have been in me all along. It is in you now. You won't be able to save all members of your family but I hope that the choices you make with this information will be for the best.

Firstly, you must not trust any of the members of the Royal family. Especially Queen Cersei and Prince Joffrey. He will seem charming, a picture of everything you have ever wanted but do not, under any circumstances, give him your heart or your trust. Giving him the latter will kill Lady, I know how much you love her so please trust me for her sake, at least. The former will lead you to betray father, too. Avoiding this might not save his life, in the end, but it will let you live without the guilt and remorse that I'll carry with me to my grave.

As Sansa read the last line, Lady nuzzled up closer and licked at the tears that slowly fell down Sansa's cheeks. How could she ever betray father? Sansa had not met any Lannisters or the Baratheon King and Prince but she could not fathom how someone that was now a stranger could ever make her put their needs above those of her family.

Secondly, the King will wish for a betrothal between you and Prince Joffrey, but you must tell father that you do not wish it, as convincingly as you can. I know you dream of being a Queen someday, but even if you agree to the match, you will never be Joffrey's Queen, only his prisoner and plaything. He may look gallant and handsome but he is a cruel beast, worse than most of the stories that Old Nan told you and your siblings.

This brings me to my third, and most important, point. I know that now you firmly believe that Old Nan's stories are just that, old tales created to scare young girls and boys, but some of them are, in fact, true as you'll find out. Like the existence of the Others. But before I tell you all about them, I must first reveal to you the truth about the boy you consider your half-brother, Jon Snow.

Sansa wondered how Jon Snow could possibly be connected with the Others. Why was he so important?

What I am about to tell you is a secret that could have died with our father if it weren't for Howland Reed. You see, Jon is not our father's bastard son. He is truly the son of our aunt Lyanna and her abductor, Rhaegar Targaryen. As you read this, only our father and Howland Reed know this information and as I have previously stated, you must make sure that that's how it remains. Where I am from, it is presumed that Lyanna did not go against her will and

in fact, married Prince Rhaegar before her untimely death which makes Jon a legitimate Targaryen Prince with a right to sit the Iron Throne.

At this point, Sansa dared to believe every word. She knew of no one who had the sheer imagination to come up with what she was now reading. Still, Jon - a Targaryen Prince? The premise was astounding, no wonder that it was paramount that all in possession of this information kept it hidden. It could cost Jon his life! And Father's too... Sansa's heart ached for her mother and father. She knew that Catelyn's woe from the daily reminder of her husband's dishonour was real. This made Sansa conclude that her mother was not aware of the reality of Jon's parentage. That made her feel for her father, too, he had to shoulder this all by himself since Jon was born. He was her cousin then, not a half-brother. Sansa's head now throbbed for real.

I reconnected with Jon before any of this was known. We were both at our lowest points, thinking ourselves the last members of a ruined House. But we found strength in each other and built what we once took for granted, what you now take for granted, from the ground up. We raised it all back from the ashes and somehow along the way politics and the revelation of Jon's true parentage thrust us both into a marriage that we were not ready for. People hailed us as King and Queen in the North, yet almost as soon as they put crowns on our heads, the Others forced us to take up swords instead. And somehow along the way to what could have been the end of the world as we knew it, we fell in love. I'd like to think that I know you, that I know myself, and if that is true then you must find this the most unbelievable part of this whole letter.

Sansa could not help but agree, these days she hardly even spoke to Jon. It wasn't proper, and mother did not like it. Suddenly, remembering the way Jon's eyes saddened when she called him "half-brother" made her feel guilty. She couldn't quite wrap her head around it all.

Out of everything that I have done in my short life, perhaps what I regret most is that I got to spend so little time with the man that gave purpose to my entire existence when I no longer had the strength to go on. I am writing this now because I realised that the reason it took so long for us to open up our hearts to each other was because we never learned to trust the other at the age when we still had our innocence. When Jon died fighting the Others hardly six moons passed since I first told him I loved him. Now his son, Ned, will never know his father. Even though Jon led the army that fought for the Dawn and vanquished the Night's King with his own sword, he never came back to me. Although this evil no longer hangs above our lives, my son remains the only reason why I go on living. I know that telling you all this might not necessarily let Jon live beyond his last fight, but we both know of the fierceness with which we love our family, so I hope you understand the nature of my attempt to right these wrongs.

Please treat him better, I trust that you will use this information wisely. I am sorry to put so much weight on your young shoulders. Many will come and try to stomp out your kindness, compassion, and faith in this world, but I want you to know that the only reason why I am able to give this letter to you is because we are still one and the same in a small part of our hearts. Remember to burn this letter after you finish.

The letter was not signed, it didn't need a signature. Sansa did not know of anyone who could copy out her letters so precisely. And who besides her parents could have gotten their hands on the Stark seal? Surely stealing was way too much trouble for a silly prank. Why was she even considering how this could be a lie? A miracle presented itself to her today and even as Sansa cried herself to sleep that never quite overtook her, she decided to dedicate her life to making a change and prepared herself for heartache. Her future self helped save Westeros from the Others, but it was up to this Sansa to save her.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Sansa adjusts to life with the knowledge of what was written in the letter that she received.

King Robert and the rest of the Royal family arrive at Winterfell. Sansa and Jon share a conversation after the welcoming feast.

Chapter Notes

I was utterly overwhelmed by all the comments that the first chapter received. I don't want to spam you all lovely people with replies, but I want you to know that I have read them all and truly appreciate everything you said.

I hope you'll enjoy this chapter, there will be more to come :)

Against the insistence of her mother, Sansa did not wear her best dress in hopes of drawing as little attention to herself as possible during the welcoming of the Royal retinue. Standing in the courtyard surrounded by her closest family and the rest of the household, Sansa is filled with a mixed feeling of excitement and apprehension. The letter that she had received earlier that sennight robbed her of pure happiness that she would have otherwise experienced in this instance. Still, she was eager to see for herself what the ruling family was like, especially Prince Joffrey.

Arya was nowhere to be seen. Her Lady mother was growing increasingly worried which was evident in her tone of voice when she inquired about her sister's whereabouts. Sansa could only shrug, she didn't have the faintest idea what her sister was up to. She did show up eventually, donning a funny looking helmet that was much too big for her head. Their father was not pleased with the sight and confiscated it immediately.

Oh, Arya, thought Sansa, what were you thinking when you wore it in the first place? Obviously, no one would let you keep it when we are to receive the most important people in the Seven kingdoms.

Still, Sansa could not help but be a little jealous of her little sister. Sansa could use a helmet of her own. That way, even if her heart betrayed her and started beating faster for Prince Joffrey, the feeling would not be reciprocated.

As their expected guests rode in he was the first one she truly saw. And Gods, he was beautiful. A true golden Prince. As she looked at him, he looked at her too. She was the only one that was graced with a smile from the Baratheon Prince and although Sansa fought it, she couldn't help feeling flattered. Although the Queen was yet to appear, Sansa supposed that Joffrey looked like an image of his mother as he had none of the fat King Robert in his features. The sight of King Robert himself disappointed her immensely. Still, like everyone else, she bowed because that was the proper etiquette.

This isn't what Kings are supposed to look like, she thought to herself, but then again, Jon would be a King and he is young and...well-built.

Somehow, Sansa couldn't quite bring herself to call him handsome even though by all accounts that word perfectly described Jon. She knew for a fact that all of the kitchen girls were enamoured with him, or at least those who were sensible enough not to set their eyes on Robb.

Sansa's thoughts completely turned to Jon then. If her future self was to be believed, Jon Snow was Sansa's soulmate. She still had trouble adjusting to that truth. They were close when they were younger before Sansa learned the significance of the word 'bastard', now she supposed she hardly knew the boy that everyone called a Snow. Distracted by the thoughts in her head, Sansa hardly noticed Arya's exclamations about the Imp and Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer.

The Queen emerged then and she was as beautiful as everyone said. Sansa wondered how someone with such breathtakingly pure features could be a deceiver. Maybe the Queen was not as bad as the others? She really wasn't sure.

The King greeted each Stark, in turn, starting with Sansa's father. Soon it would be her turn to be acknowledged.

"You are a pretty one," said the King when he addressed her. It was something that was often said about Sansa, yet this time, it felt special because it came from the King. He wasn't anything like the sovereigns in her favourite storybooks, but the little comment made her feel proud all the same.

The rest of the household apart from her siblings were not noticed at all, even Jon who was as much Ned's son as all her brothers. Sansa would have to meet Jon alone, and soon. He was not the man she would fall in love with yet, but for the sake of her own incarnation in another time she will try to save him. Sansa guessed that it was easier to save someone that you knew.

She was grateful for how exhausted the Queen was because that meant that she wouldn't have to spend any more time with the Royal children just yet beyond the initial introductions. Sansa was angry at herself because, despite her best efforts, Joffrey's effortless charm still made her heart flutter. She would have never noticed the malicious glint in his eyes if she wasn't looking for it. It was as alarming as the Hound that always stayed by the Prince's side but it wasn't enough to completely quench the small flame that now burned in her heart.

Catching Jon for any meaningful conversation proved more of a challenge than Sansa expected. Even when she smiled at him across the yard, his instinct made him look back over

his shoulder as he instantly assumed that Sansa's attentions were not meant for him. The best she got that time was a weak upturn in the corners of his mouth and a hesitant wave. One thing that Sansa did know about Jon was that he was not great with girls in general, and it seemed that her previous attempts at teaching him the ways of ladies did not work well at all.

It was already time for the welcome feast before she saw Jon again. The only issue was that he usually sat all the way at the back of the hall and Sansa's place was closer to the high table. Closer to Joffrey. The Prince escorted her through the hall and Sansa fought the urge to turn her head towards the back, where her eyes would undoubtedly meet those of her future love. But it was not proper so instead, she concentrated on the comfortable feel of her arm inside the Crown Prince's. Sansa cursed her fate, why did she have to wait so long for her King when there was a Prince who could soon be her betrothed if the rumours were to be believed? Trusting the now burned letter was much more difficult in practice than in theory, she realised.

Even as she sat down to feast next to Jeyne Poole and Beth Cassel, Sansa was more preoccupied with her thoughts than the food that set before her. For her own sake, she chose to avoid their conversation about how dashing the Prince looked. It would be better for Sansa to purge all thoughts of his good looks and impeccable manners from her head. The letter said it would be for the best.

Come to think of it, the letter curiously omitted any mentions of Arya. Even when it listed the members of her family that will soon be deceased. That most likely meant that Arya was alive and survived the war with the Others. Sansa wondered if she should also make an effort with her sister since she and Jon were so alike. She was glad that she would still have Arya by her side in her later years, even if her little sister was quite insufferable from time to time. A blob of something slimy hit Sansa's cheek then, closely followed by the sound of Arya's laugh that revealed her as the perpetrator of this folly.

"Arya!" Exclaimed Sansa, her recent positive sentiments towards her sibling were completely forgotten as she made haste wiping the offending piece of food off of her face. She decided to do her best and ignore Arya's antics, but that was the absolute limit of her regard.

Although Sansa still chatted casually with Jeyne and Beth, her eyes drifted frequently to the back of the hall where Jon was engrossed in deep conversation with her uncle Benjen. The wine was being poured generously today in light of the special occasion and by the looks of it, Jon was taking full advantage of the situation. So far, Sansa had counted five downed cups of wine on his part. It didn't help that the serving girls were always swarming about, eager to pour him a refill.

Suddenly, a change came over Jon's face, his smile was replaced by an angry frown seconds before he stormed out of the hall altogether. Before Sansa could investigate, Joffrey approached her and Sansa was obliged to entertain him.

"I hear that we might be betrothed soon, my Lady." Sansa would have liked nothing more than to stop steering her heart away from this golden boy but her sense warned her against

letting down her guard.

“That will surely be to the benefit of both our Great Houses, my Prince,” replied Sansa, doing her best to keep all personal remarks about the issue out of this conversation. Later, she would have to hatch a plan that would allow her to get out of this arrangement. She wished she didn’t have to at all.

The moment Sansa mentioned feeling feverish, Joffrey seemed eager to leave her by herself. Maybe he was not such a gentleman, after all. Even so, Sansa was grateful for his indifference because that meant that she could follow Jon outside without any prying eyes. As she made excuses to her girlfriends and walked towards the exit, she noticed Tyrion Lannister making the opposite journey.

It must be awful to have to live with such a hideous face, she couldn’t help but think. She felt guilty as the ugly words formed in her head.

Jon was sitting outside, devoid of any human company but with his direwolf next to him.

“Have you already decided what to call him?” He turns around as abruptly as the five cups of wine in his belly would let him. The surprise at her presence is written plainly across his face that hid so little in his inebriated state.

“Ghost, because he is so quiet,” Jon replied. Sansa thought that he looked like a ghost too, so white that he wouldn’t be seen anywhere where it had snow. Except for the red eyes, of course, they carried true fire within them, Sansa noticed.

Ghost approached Sansa willingly and she stroked the wolf’s soft fur as if it was Lady that she was petting.

“Well, I guess he likes you better than he liked the Imp,” he says matter-of-factly.

“I see that you have gotten better at complimenting young ladies since we’ve last spoken.” Sansa ought to have been offended by the comment, but Jon was clearly well in his cups and all she could do was laugh.

“What can I say, I’ve had a good teacher,” he japed back, referring to their previous scarce conversations. “What about the name of your wolf then?”

“Lady,” replied Sansa with a hint of pride in her voice. Discounting her transgression the morning Sansa found the letter, her wolves’ behaviour was immaculate because of all the effort that Sansa put in her training.

“That’s a pretty name.” Sansa laughed again.

“Yes, whoever taught you how to converse with girls must have been a very capable teacher indeed.” She smiled then and much to her own surprise, he returned it in earnest this time.

Sansa observed that it was probably the drink that was responsible for the lack of the usual tension between them. She hoped that the residual pleasant feeling of this conversation would root itself in Jon’s mind and memory and stay there even after the wine leaves his veins.

“I wish to join the Night’s Watch,” he declared suddenly. The resolution in his voice told Sansa that this was something he was considering for a while.

“A noble cause, they even call the men of the Night’s Watch the Black Knights of the Wall, you know.”

Sansa previously thought of advising him against this decision, but if Jon was to fight the Night’s King in the future, he had to obtain the knowledge of the Others somewhere. He also had to learn how to fight them. How to kill them. Jon certainly could not accomplish such a feat in King’s Landing. Thus, Sansa concluded that the best course of action to preserve Jon’s life was to let him make this choice.

“Father seems against the idea of me pledging my life to their cause,” confessed Jon, “I am not sure if he’ll let me go at all, to be honest.”

“I am certain he will come around when he sees that this is what you truly want. Promise me that you will write as often as you can, Jon, please? I will certainly write to you.” She looked at him searchingly. He was visibly taken aback by her request. In her mind, it made sense in her mind, though, if she couldn’t personally spend time and get to know him as she grew, letters were the next best thing.

“Sansa, I doubt that you will have time to spare to write a word to me, soon you will be busy charming the Lords and Ladies in King’s Landing and before you know it, you will become Queen.”

“Don’t count on that, Joffrey is not that much to my liking.” It was her turn to confess what was weighing on her heart and mind.

“That’s a lie, I saw the way you looked at him when he arrived.”

“I was simply amused by the fact that he looks like a girl,” she said. Not a real truth, but now that she thought about it Joffrey did look strikingly feminine. As she first suspected, he bore an incredible resemblance to his Queen mother and although tall in stature, he lacked the build of a true warrior.

They shared another laugh but before they could continue their conversation, Robb emerged from the Hall’s entrance and informed Sansa that her mother was looking for her.

“Farewell, Jon, sleep well.” She gave him her last smile and disappeared behind the stone wall, leaving Jon Snow alone once again.

Sansa felt strangely happy as she went over the conversation she shared with Jon. Perhaps there was something to him, after all. But Sansa did not think herself quite ready to discover what that something was exactly. Her elated state to embrace Arya affectionately, resulting in a lot of confusion and feigned disgust on her sister’s part.

Let her wonder what ghost had possessed me, thought Sansa, amused. She wondered if her spirit momentarily merged with Jon’s who was always very close with Arya.

Their paths would certainly diverge very soon and they would be separated for many years, but Sansa was still grateful to that letter she received for giving her a shared memory to cherish and remember. Sansa yearned to create more of those before they had to part.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Sansa spends more time with Joffrey and considers the possibility of their betrothal. An embroidery lesson provides an opportunity to reflect.

Jon and Arya discuss their sister.

Chapter Notes

Apologies that this is a bit of a filler chapter, but I needed to show some of the changes in Sansa's behaviour and the rationale behind them.

A short Jon POV at the end too, more of that to come.

Thank you again for the lovely messages, they are much appreciated.

Prince Joffrey was impossible to escape. Whenever Sansa crossed paths with him and any member of either of their families, they always insisted for her to spend time with him. She gave him an extensive tour of Winterfell, visiting different locations each time. Sansa wanted to do her family proud so in every single place she tried to recall as many stories as she could to keep the Prince interested. Despite her best effort, Joffrey looked utterly bored at best. Mostly, he simply looked displeased or shot worried looks at Lady who walked quietly beside Sansa. Hopefully, the time they spent together would make her like him less.

“This part of the fortress is said to have been built by Brandon the Builder himself, he chose the location cleverly as a hot spring runs below this castle and through its walls,” explained Sansa, “this is why we can keep warm even through winters. Although I haven’t experienced one myself, of course.”

Joffrey always nodded in agreement or made another sound that would serve as an acknowledgement of whatever she just said. Sansa always felt the need to say more than was necessary as he never made proper conversation, but Sansa felt it improper to let an uncomfortable silence hang when one was in royal company. At least the young Prince was pretty to look at,

“Sansa!” Sansa turned around to face the direction the voice came from. It was Jon. Joffrey sneered at him, and pulled Sansa closer, possessively.

Oh, now you have an interest in my company, thought Sansa bitterly. Lady ran towards Jon crouched in order to pet her thoroughly.

“Father wants to see you,” said Jon simply, ignoring the obvious disdain on Prince Joffrey’s face. Sansa suspected that that particular attitude was something he was used to. Coming from her and mother, especially.

“Please accept my sincerest apologies, my Prince. I’m afraid I must go find my father, it sounds rather urgent.” She flashed her sweetest smile.

“Very well, my Lady, until next time.” Joffrey did not appear at all bothered by her departure and Sansa was glad for it. She curtsied and bid him farewell.

She walked towards Jon who straightened up, looking extremely pleased with himself after his successful rescue. They started walking together towards the main living quarters, Lady following at Sansa’s heels.

“So, how was your head this morning?” The question was meant to be purely whimsical, but when Sansa actually said the words out loud, they were laced with a sincere sense of worry.

“Don’t mention it.” He averted his eyes from her, but not before she noticed how bloodshot and tired they looked. “Drinking those last two cups was not one of my best decisions.”

“Well, I hope you feel better soon,” she said and meant it truly. Sansa remembered the times when she wished that Jon did not exist, mostly because she noticed the anguish that her mother experienced from his constant presence. Now, she found his presence soothing. She wondered if it was because their love was written in the stars by the Old Gods, fated like the love stories in the best songs. Sansa looked up at the sky, but naturally, she couldn’t see any stars in the vast blue expanse filled with daylight.

Some say the stars shone brightest during the Long Night, thought Sansa, perhaps I’ll find my answer when it comes again.

They settled into a comfortable silence, so unlike the one she experienced with Joffrey until he had to leave her at the door of her father’s solar. Sansa knocked and soon her father’s booming voice rung from inside the room. Jon’s lips mouthed a silent goodbye before she could disappear inside the door.

“I heard you were asking for me, Father,” she started, “is everything alright?”

“Sit, Sansa, we have something important to discuss,” said Eddard with an alarmingly serious tone in his voice, motioning to the stool situated next to his. She noted that her father sounded more troubled since the King arrived. “The King has bestowed a very high honour for me and asked me to be his Hand. He also offered to betroth you to Joffrey, but nothing is set in stone as of yet. So it would be best if you kept it to yourself for now, and got to know the boy quietly to see how well you like him.”

Sansa nodded, unsure if she should tell her father that she’d never consent to marry Joffrey. He was always fairly polite and pleasant, he even told her that she looked beautiful at the

feast. He told her she looked lovely and pretty twice since. She was flattered, of course, to receive such attentions from a beautiful Crown Prince. But she also wanted to be complimented for something other than what her parents gave her from time to time.

“And how would the King feel if we refused the betrothal?” She decided to use a more diplomatic approach to gauge Ned’s reaction about her true feelings.

“I suppose Noble Houses do not refuse royal matches often, especially when those matches would one day make their daughter Queen of the Seven Kingdoms,” her father mused, “Robert is very eager to unite our two houses, but if you find Joffrey disagreeable I’m sure other arrangements can be made.” He gave her a reassuring smile.

“I’ll do as you say, Father, will that be all?”

“Yes, daughter, now run along. It is almost time for your lessons.” Again, Sansa obeyed. It was a shame that Lady couldn’t join her in her lessons but her mother was very clear about that particular arrangement so Sansa stopped by her room first so her wolf could get some rest until she returned.

Today she had to practice embroidery, she remembered. Sometimes Sansa thought that the reason she enjoyed it so much was because she was extremely proficient. She wished that Septa Mordane let her practice her figures more often, though, as she was dreadful with them. She would be Queen in the North someday, so knowing how to manage all the ledgers would surely be more useful than knowing dozens of different kinds of stitches.

The room where they had most of their lessons was much fuller than usual. Today they were joined by Princess Myrcella and all her ladies, too. Jeyne Poole and Beth Cassel were also there and waiting for the lesson to start. Their eyes lit up when they spotted Sansa, motioning for her to sit beside them. She formally greeted Myrcella and acknowledged her companions before she joined her friends.

Arya was, as always, late. Sansa suspected that Septa Mordane was also absent because she was busy looking for her little sister. Embroidery lessons were always the hardest for Arya to endure, the long and repetitive nature of the task did not sit well with her. Still, Sansa did not appreciate her sister’s disregard for the time of others.

It was extremely improper to keep a Princess waiting, so Sansa pulled up a chair to one of the high shelves in the room where the Septa kept all the sewing supplies. As Sansa distributed stretches of fabric mounted onto hoops as well as needles and thread, the ladies exchanged shallow pleasantries. Sansa joined in, remarking on Myrcella’s exquisite dress and the particularly pretty way Jeyne styled her hair.

Soon Arya was practically dragged into the room by the Septa. She accepted her tools as if it was a death sentence and sulked over her work alone, away from the rest of the girls. Sansa wished she could teach her, but Arya would surely assume that her sister was only mocking her. It was best to avoid that situation entirely. Sansa couldn’t help but feel sorry for her sibling, Septa Mordane always wanted to make Arya into a proper Lady but when it came to embroidery she didn’t really teach anything these days, just offered comments on their work. Sansa prided herself on the perpetual praise that she received so the Septa’s shortcomings did

not bother her as much, but she could see how their instructor's unhelpful attitude was detrimental to Arya's progress.

Septa Mordane was all over Myrcella the moment she saw Arya pick up a needle and hardly ever stepped away from their royal guest for most of the lesson. Sansa could not complain as that let her chat to her friends without disturbance or prying ears. Myrcella had chosen a rich gold fabric and busied herself with an interesting design that featured thin black antlers of a stag surrounded by an array of flowers. It was pretty, Sansa supposed, but some of her stitches were not quite right.

If that was Arya's work, Septa Mordane would be quicker to notice the imperfections, thought Sansa solemnly as she considered this small injustice. Yet, not a single word of criticism escaped the Septa's mouth as she gushed over the Princess' work.

Sansa looked down on her work with extreme satisfaction. She chose a thick, midnight black cotton. Adorning the fabric were two wolves, in Sansa's head at least. On the fabric, there was only one so far, with deep grey fur and golden eyes. As Arya looked over her sister's work her eyes sparkled with recognition. The wolf depicted truly resembled Lady. Her progress made her stitch even more enthusiastically.

"So, how do you like the Princes?" Although Sansa's question was quiet to keep the Septa from overhearing, Jeyne and Beth turned to her immediately and eagerly whispered back their thoughts. Not much had happened in Winterfell besides the arrival of the Royal family, so Sansa hardly knew what else they could possibly discuss.

"Prince Tommen is sweet enough but much too plump for my liking," offered Beth, "Prince Joffrey, on the other hand. So handsome..." She sighed wishfully.

"He looked at me once at the feast," enthused Jeyne, "Prince Joffrey has the most gorgeous eyes that I have ever seen! Like two shining emeralds. I bet he can swing a sword at least half as well as his Uncle."

Sansa smiled and politely agreed with everything they said half-heartedly. Even if her father didn't tell her to keep it all secret, she wouldn't have mentioned the betrothal. How could Sansa explain her lack of desire to marry the Prince? They would never understand.

Although Sansa was determined to make that particular conversation brief, her friends' elevated voices drew Arya's attention.

"What are you talking about?" Sansa was dumbstruck by the question. Arya made her sentiments about Joffrey very clear when they broke their fast that morning, even though all she did was look at him disapprovingly. It was very likely that disclosing the topic would cause an argument.

Jeyne gave Sansa a puzzled look before she broke out into a giggle. Beth looked slightly embarrassed with her red cheeks. Sansa stayed silent, her friends followed her example and thus no one said a word.

"Tell me," insisted Arya.

Septa Mordane was busy laughing about something with Myrcella, so it seemed safe to let Arya in on their conversation.

“We were talking about Prince Joffrey,” confessed Sansa, hoping that Arya’s dislike of him would discourage her from asking further questions. Sadly, Jeyne had other plans.

“You see, Prince Joffrey has taken a great liking to your sister,” declared her best friend, “At the feast, I heard him call her extremely beautiful.”

“I heard that they will be married soon,” added Beth with awe in her voice, “Sansa will be the Queen someday.” Now it was her turn to feel embarrassed. Sansa felt her cheeks flush.

Well, she isn’t wrong, Sansa thought, a Queen, but not of the Seven Kingdoms. Just the most important one, home.

Her dreams were still so far away and it wouldn’t do for her friends to spread such rumours. Lord Stark could think Sansa the origin of them all.

“Beth, you shouldn’t make such things up.” Sansa felt uneasy as she reprimanded her friend, so she took Beth’s hand in hers gently and looked her in the eye to reassure her that her comment bore no true ill will.

“So what did you think of Prince Joffrey, Arya?” It was Jeyne who asked. Hopefully, a commotion would be avoided, although one never knew with Arya who was as wild as the harshest northern winds.

“Jon says he looks like a girl,” was the only thing that Arya said.

I wonder where he got that from, Sansa laughed in her mind, that is probably better than what Arya herself thinks about Joffrey.

Sansa had to change the topic, and fast before either of her companions decided to challenge Arya’s words. Glancing around the room, Sansa’s eyes fell on a particularly well-done rose that Princess Myrcella was working on, raising her voice she complimented it for all to hear. In the corner of her eye, Sansa observed her sister pulling her own work protectively against her chest.

Sansa’s remark drew unwanted attention of the Septa to the rest of the sewing girls and when Arya received the usual unpleasant commentary her sister exploded into a fit of anger and stormed out of the room. Some things could not be avoided, it seemed.

Jon was watching the yard below with a longing look full of melancholy. Suddenly, Ghost moved from the position the wolf occupied for the past hour which made Jon turn around to find the source of the disturbance. He was pleased to see Arya with her own wolf. The beast greeted each other calmly and Ghost moved on quickly to sit back at his side. He wasn’t that

fond of the company of others. So far, Sansa was the only one Ghost seemed enthusiastic about. Arya's presence worried him, he sensed that soon he'll find himself comforting Arya after she will undoubtedly be scolded by her mother and the Septa. When he questioned her about the reason she abandoned her lesson, she seemed reluctant to tell him the truth so Jon did not press it any further.

"I wanted to see them fighting in the yard," was Arya's only answer. He knew that that wasn't the truth of it, but it was the only answer he was offered. Jon invited her to sit beside him.

Arya seemed disappointed when she spotted Bran fighting with Prince Tommen. He could hardly blame her, the two boys wore so much padding that it did not look like a real fight.

"Robb said he found Sansa with you at the end of the feast," mentioned Arya, were you the one who knocked some sense into her? She isn't like the Sansa that I know."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she is harder to bait recently. And she has gone several days without calling you a bastard, or 'half-brother' for that matter." Jon noticed it too, it was a welcome change since Catelyn already subjected him to so much scorn on a daily basis. He remembered the day Sansa's attitude towards him changed. Before that, she was as happy with Jon's company as she was with Robb's. She was back to treating him as a true member of their family, but somehow it was different now. Perhaps because she was almost a woman grown.

"Let's hope it is a permanent change, you should also make an effort to make things better between you two. She is your only sister after all." Jon looked at her pointedly, to tell her that he was serious about the suggestion.

Sansa reached out to him recently, and since her attitude towards Jon was a regular cause of arguments between the sisters, he felt the need to remedy the situation.

"I'll try, but only because it is you asking." She made a face, that never failed to make him laugh.

"Look, you will miss Bran's victory!" Her eyes darted back to the fight in the yard. Prince Tommen was on the ground and it was pretty clear that Bran was the last man, or rather a boy, standing.

As Ser Rodrik called for another round between Robb and Joffrey, Jon wished he could spar with the little shit that was the Prince. Jon beat his brother more often than not, so he was confident that he could beat Joffrey too. Perhaps that would teach the boy not to look at Winterfell with such disdain. But who would let a bastard spar with a future King?

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Arya deals with the consequences of skipping her lessons.

Sansa prepares for her trip to the South. A tragedy strikes the Stark family.

Chapter Notes

Thank you again for all the comments and kudos on this story. It means the world to me!

Apologies that this took slightly longer, it was a difficult chapter for me to write.

Warning for a rather traumatic description of an awful accident.

Even when her mother and her septa joined forces to tell Arya off, she refused to cry. When they left, her eyes swelled with tears that were barely noticeable when she looked at herself in the looking glass. Her cheeks remained dry, she preferred them that way too. Tears signified weakness, and Arya wished to avoid weakness at all costs. Crying was of no use to a girl like her. It didn't get her anything, unlike Sansa. Arya thought that her sister even cried prettily. She did everything prettily. That's why her tears almost always got her sister what she wanted.

Soon, Sansa would undoubtedly marry Prince Joffrey and they would be completely insufferable together. Arya already dreaded the day Sansa would become the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. That would give her leave to order her around whenever she wished for it. That would be a truly horrible day.

If it ever comes to that I will surely run away, decided Arya, *to Braavos or even as far away as Asshai where she'd never be able to touch me.* Her idea pleased her exceedingly.

In Essos there would be no one to tell her what to do. Arya wouldn't have to wear dresses or corsets and she'd carry a sword with some fearsome name on her hip. People would whisper her name with fright on the streets. And then when Arya earned all the valour that Essos had to offer she'd come back home and her sister would have no choice but to Knight her. She could join Bran on incredible adventures all across the realm, and he would write them all up in a thick, heavy book so they would be remembered for all eternity.

That would be a great life indeed, she thought.

A soft knock brought Arya back to her bland reality.

“Go away,” she yelled. Still, whoever it was ignored her instructions, the door opened to reveal her sister.

“I said go away,” repeated Arya, “don’t you understand the Common Tongue?”

“I just wanted to check on you, Mother seemed angry when she left your room... I was just walking past.” Sansa lowered her eyes to the ground in a way that made Arya momentarily regret her harsh words.

Arya fell silent then and her sister took that as an invitation to enter. It wasn’t really, but Arya had no strength to argue after Catelyn gave her hell for skipping her lessons.

“I just don’t see why they are making me fiddle with those stitches all day when I am no good at it, surely there are other, better things I could be doing with my time.”

“It’s alright, Arya, I understand, I also...”

“You will never understand!” Arya even stood up from her bed in protest. “You are so perfect at everything you do, ever since you were born I bet. Sansa Stark, a Lady through and through. No one has any time for poor Arya Horseface these days unless it is to scold her. And you! You get everything you want just by batting your eyelashes!”

Sansa was the one upset now, crying even. She turned away so Arya could not see her tears and stormed out, leaving a lonely sort of emptiness behind her. Arya went back to sulking on her bed, her mind now calmer from her outburst.

When she heard another knock at the door, Arya stood up excitedly. She hoped it was Jon, or maybe Robb. She wanted to tell him how much she hated that prick Joff for being so abysmally rude to him earlier.

“Come in.” It was Sansa again. Arya’s heart sunk for a moment, expecting her mother to come in as well, this time, to chastise her for upsetting her sister. Her sister came alone. Arya did not know what to make of it. She brought a wooden carved box with her, with simple straight borders and rectangular indentations on all the sides. Sansa approached Arya steadily and placed the box on the bed where Arya could reach it.

Inside were dozens of fabric scraps. Some were filled with stitched even more crooked than the ones Arya managed that morning, some looked practically identical to what Arya managed that afternoon. Others were pretty, albeit not as pretty as the wolf that Sansa was currently working on. Suddenly, Arya felt foolish. The sheer multitude of the pieces of fabric suggested a length of time that couldn’t possibly fit into their lessons. All this work must have amounted to several weeks of stitching.

“Why are you showing me this? Why would you hide it in the first place?” Arya realised that she actually wanted an answer to those questions.

“I guess it’s because it sounds better when you have talent instead of sleepless nights.” If anyone else saw Sansa’s face at that point, they’d never think that she was crying minutes earlier. Her face was a picture of stoicism, the calm that surrounded the storm in her eyes.

She left without another word, leaving Arya surrounded by the fruits of her efforts. She picked up the ugliest piece of cloth from the collection. It was a poor attempt at a crown of blue winter roses, speckled with tiny dots of blood. Arya caressed the fabric gently with her fingers and let her body fall on the bed. The fabric rested over her heart and her hand rested on it.

Packing for her trip South was not an easy feat for Sansa. She couldn’t believe that tomorrow they will set off on the King’s road. The fortnight of the King’s visit passed much too quickly for her liking. She was not ready to leave just yet. Not ready to say goodbye to Robb and to little Rickon. It wasn’t easy knowing that tomorrow will most likely be the last time she sees them both alive.

Jon has been harder to get a hold of since her father informed him that he will be joining the Watch, more distant too. And it wasn’t just with her either, Sansa hardly saw him with any of her siblings since he’s heard the news. It was strange to see him act that way considering it was his idea in the first place. Their only conversation in the past few days happened purely by chance when they met in the Godswood.

Since receiving the letter Sansa started dedicating more of her early mornings to prayer. The spot she covered up that one fateful morning looked unremarkable again yet it still drew her eye all the same. Jon entered the sacred grounds just as Sansa was about to leave and she knew immediately that if she didn’t speak up their next conversation would be purely consumed with goodbyes.

“So it’s certain now?” There was only one thing that Sansa could ask about really.

“Yes, Father said so himself.” Jon sighed. “Apparently there is no place for me at court and... Lady Catelyn won’t have me staying here with Robb and Rickon.”

“Isn’t it what you want, though?” Jon sounded less taken with the prospect than he did the night of the feast. Maybe it was the wine that fuelled his enthusiasm. Perhaps it simply felt better to consider the Watch as an option and not as a finality.

“I guess it is, wanting anything else now wouldn’t change anything, I don’t even know why I am here.” Yet, the hint of desperation in his voice betrayed the fact that he was here for something. A sign, perhaps. Sansa looked and listened for them too. Not just in the Godswood, for in the North, the Old Gods ruled even in places where no humans dwelled.

“The South will love you for sure,” continued Jon, probably because he felt obliged to make up for the fact that Sansa didn’t know what to say. “I hope it will be everything you dreamed of and more.”

“I hope so too,” she smiled and tried to mean it too. But Sansa knew all too well now that the South held no dreams, only nightmares. Thinking of all the grief to come upset her immensely and she made some poor excuse in order to keep Jon from seeing her in such a sorry state.

Parting with Jon was going to be hard too, but he promised to write and the letter promised that they will meet again. It wouldn't be a true goodbye, she was certain of that. The Night's Watch was a stranger to politics and they did not much care who sat the Iron Throne. Whatever she did in King's Landing at this point shouldn't affect his fate. She'll have to be extremely cautious with what she writes to him just in case, to keep his fate preserved until they see each other at the start of winter.

Sansa removed the contents of one of the chests completely in order to try and put everything back together in a more compact way. She wondered whether she should leave room for any new dresses that she may purchase in King's Landing.

I better pack as much as I can now, thought Sansa, we can buy a new trunk if I have too many new things, after all.

Her things were sorted by a relative measure of importance. They were entering a dangerous territory, where all the people that she has been warned against held the greatest power. If they had to make a swift escape at any point, Sansa was confident that she could reduce the amount they had to carry by only bringing the chest with her most favourite dresses and accessories.

She was bringing them for her own enjoyment, of course. Nothing to do with the Crown Prince. He disappointed her further the day she chased after Arya at the end of her lessons. Although she did not witness his initial spat with Robb, she couldn't help but overhear several conversations from the Lannister soldiers during her search for Arya. They talked much too loudly, praising Joffrey's abrasive words. It wasn't anything she could directly confront him about and that made it worse. In the last few days more and more people seemed to have been aware of their betrothal and Sansa's parents gave her no sign that it wasn't going ahead. She could forgive Joffrey's disinterest in her stories in a heartbeat, but belittling her brother was a different matter entirely.

Sansa hoped that Robb would show up the Prince during today's hunt. Although her wish didn't stop her from wishing Joffrey good luck that morning. Maybe that would make him ride his horse too recklessly, maybe some nook in the ground would make him trip up and fall and then all the men will be laughing at his inadequacy. Sansa was shocked at her own thinking, she would surely have to spend more time praying in front of the Heart tree and maybe in the Sept too. Violence wasn't the answer and Sansa thought that it never should be.

She wondered what it took to break a Royal engagement. She could pretend to be utterly unsuitable by taking a page from her sister's book of antics. But that could easily ruin the reputation of her family, this she would never allow. Her father was not bringing her to the South to make him look ridiculous in front of people who were beneath him in status and character. She wondered whether Lord Stark told Jon about his real mother. She thought it was the right thing to do, the honourable thing.

And my father always does the honourable thing, Sansa concluded, Jon deserves to know.

A wolf howled in the distance. Sansa was used to such happenings ever since they got their pups. This howl was persistent, though, it went on longer than any animal sound that Sansa ever heard. And Lady, who has been previously resting by her bed, answered. Sansa did not have the same acute senses of her wolf friend but even she could tell that this howl was anguished. It was a call for help.

Sansa was not dressed warmly enough to be outside but the wolf howl made something in her heart stir and then compress into an unshakeable sense of worry. She followed her wolf down and through the Keep, nearly tripping on her skirts once or twice. Sansa ran after Lady all the way to the old broken tower.

It seemed as if everyone who did not leave with the hunt gathered round. Most people stood further away from whatever transpired and blocked the view and the way through. Somewhere beyond this wall of people, a woman wailed together with the wolf.

Someone in the crowd spotted Sansa and nudged whoever stood next to them, and that person alerted someone else. Everyone hurried to let her pass, she tried to ignore the sickeningly pitiful looks on their faces. Whatever happened, these people just stood there and said nothing. Further ahead Sansa spotted a familiar head of auburn that was so like her own. Her mother. Crying and cradling someone on the ground.

Rickon, Sansa realised. Her mind went blank, struck with the first horror that she foresaw but couldn't prevent. No, the body was too big for it to be baby Rickon. Her mother's cries were too strong for it to be not one of her siblings. Sansa's mind refused to form coherent thoughts or sentences. Tower. Body. Fall. Climbing... Bran.

Before she knew it Sansa was running, falling, sobbing. She stood up neglecting her awfully scraped up and bleeding knees and elbows. She screamed and screamed and yet it felt like she wasn't like she too was a hopeless observer of this tragedy and she was looking at this helpless little girl and her mother that cried for a Maester from a place somewhere in the crowd through which she came here.

Seemingly out of nowhere, strong arms came to envelop her shaking body. Arms that didn't let go even as she struggled against them, even though whoever was holding her was trembling too. She was surrounded by an embrace that stilled her restless mind, body and soul. She lost the ability and the desire to struggle. Bran's broken and breathless body was being carried away and she was being drawn in an opposite direction. The images in front of her were swimming in incomprehensible patterns, making her delirious and drowsy. Her knees buckled, yet this time, she did not hit the ground. All of a sudden, Sansa started having trouble breathing. The world went black.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Sansa experiences some side effects of the tampering with time. The Stark family deal with their tragedy alone and together.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for any errors, I rushed the editing process a bit more than usual.

Thank you for your comments, kudos and continued interest!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sansa Stark dreamt of holding someone in a field of white. As hard as one person can hold another without hurting them. Snowflakes fell on her hair, his furs and they remained there, preserved in all their unique beauty. Sansa could feel the wind on her exposed skin, but somehow it wasn't cold or piercing. The raging winter couldn't reach her soul that was protected by the warmth of the embrace that enveloped her.

"When do you have to go?" Sansa heard herself ask.

"Tomorrow, love." Sansa retreats from his arms at the revelation, and now she sees him for who he is. Jon, her Jon. He looked like her father, or at least what she imagined her father looked like when he was young. Only Jon looked more burdened, like the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. Sansa supposed that it wasn't far from the truth at all.

All she could do was nod silently, unable to find words to reflect the wave of desolation that hit her at his statement. It was her turn to embrace him, in her touch she tried to express all the things she couldn't say. That she was scared for his life, proud of him. How well she understood what needed to be done. Her love.

She buried her head in his chest and finds solace in the sound of his steady heartbeat, so much slower than her own that beat anxiously in its panic. The tears that fell from her cheeks stained his leather jerkin.

The wind blew more strongly and suddenly she was grasping air. The gust carried away charcoal black dust that merged with the white snowy haze. All that remained was a sound that started as a faint whisper, growing louder and louder. The cold wind that did not bother her moments prior chilled her to her very core.

Sansa, Sansa, Sansa...

“Sansa!” She felt drowsy and disoriented. “Please wake up, sweetling.”

Through half-opened eyes, she saw the face that she dreamed of wearing the same concerned look. She felt the fresh rush of air through the opened window.

“Jon,” she said, still dazed from her dream. Her eyes welled with tears again.

“He was the one that carried you here, Sansa, you’ve slept for half a day now. I’m sure he will be here soon to check on you, I even had to convince him to go have supper because the boy refused to leave.”

What was she thinking? This wasn’t Jon, just her father. The images that Sansa saw during her dream steadily slipped away, leaving behind a bitter feeling of loneliness and memories of a blindingly white winter. The face and the voice that seemed so familiar when she was asleep disappeared from her consciousness too. Her safe haven remained in the fleeting dreamscape.

“Is Bran...?” She couldn’t bear to finish the sentence, but Ned knew exactly what she meant. He looked absolutely exhausted.

“He still breathes, but he is not waking up, I’m afraid,” Lord Stark said solemnly, “your mother is with him, and the Maester too. You should rest now, I’ll get Jon to bring you some food and water.”

Sansa just stared blankly at him, still unable to comprehend everything that transpired before she collapsed.

“I know you have had your differences in the past, but it would be good if you thanked him properly for what he did.”

Sansa was slightly upset by what her father must think of her character. A proper lady would always thank her saviour. Sansa felt lethargic, her limbs felt weak. She wanted to leave her bed immediately and visit her sleeping brother. But she also needed to keep her strength and to speak with Jon, like her father wanted her to. Although these days talking to Jon never felt forced, she didn’t have to have instructions in order to initiate a conversation.

She wondered why the letter did not mention Bran. Was it because he wasn’t going to die after all?

Sansa found reassurance in that thought, but only momentarily.

Maybe he wasn’t written in because his death was an accident, she thought, or because it is not connected with them going South...

She sometimes wished that the letter did not have to be burned, although parts of it were firmly etched into her memory, some particular details were now lost on her. She must know more about the future than most, but so far she was at a complete loss as to how a young girl like her could do anything to change it.

When Jon came in with a tray of chicken soup and roasted vegetables brushed with sage butter, Sansa was struck with a previously hidden sense of hunger. She sat up in her bed.

“Are you alright?” He asked, putting the tray of food where she could reach it.

“I think so,” said Sansa, but her voice did not sound sure. She felt strangely self-conscious sitting there in front of him. Her hair was all tangled from the tossing and turning. Her eyes were surely all puffy and red from all her weeping, not a pretty sight at all. She wanted to hide her face under the covers until she was able to make herself look presentable. But Jon was there and if he noticed her abysmal appearance, he was polite enough not to show it.

“How is Bran, have you seen him? Are there any news?” He shook his head apologetically, clearly unable to answer her questions.

“I don’t think so... You know, I can’t really, your mother...”

“Of course, I am sorry I asked.” It was Sansa’s turn to look ashamed. She swirled her soup with a metal spoon absentmindedly. “I can’t believe I passed out as if all of you don’t have enough to worry about as it is.”

“Don’t say that, many would have reacted the same way if they saw what happened.” He gave her his best attempt at a reassuring smile.

“Arya wouldn’t have, I’m sure.” It was true, her sister always handled things better.

“She locked herself up in her room. She isn’t even letting me in,” he confessed. That was practically unheard of, Arya always sought out Jon’s company. But then again, her sister always hated when people saw her cry.

“Father always says that we are stronger as a pack,” said Sansa with a decisive tone, “I wish we didn’t have to all grieve alone.”

“I will try to talk to Arya,” he said and then quickly added, “ and Robb too, we will figure something out. But best to keep Rickon out of this, he is scared enough as it is.”

He opened the door to leave then but stopped in his tracks abruptly.

“Oh, I almost forgot. I snuck you something from the kitchen earlier.” He looked extremely pleased with himself, with the exact expression he wore when he rescued her from Joffrey’s company.

He reached into a roughly made satchel of brown leather that was fastened to his belt and took out a carefully folded piece of cloth. He placed it on the wooden tray before her, wordlessly gesturing for her to unwrap its contents. Sansa didn’t need to unwrap it to know what it was. She was certain of it the moment Jon placed the small present in front of her and its sweet fragrance hit her nostrils. She thought she could recognise the aroma anywhere, even in the midst of a dozen other smells.

It was a lemon cake.

A small piece of a strange kind of happiness that she felt immensely grateful for. It was slightly battered from the way it was carried, almost broken in two. The snowy sugar was all rubbed off on the cloth it was brought in. Even so, lemon cakes never failed to bring a smile on her face.

“I thought they were all gone, I can’t believe you were able to get one.” She beamed at him with the full force of her lifted spirits.

“Let’s just say that I have my sources,” he said with an awkward half-smile. “Promise me you will finish your soup beforehand, though.”

She found it extremely endearing how after all that they had been through, he still had the capacity to worry about her.

“Well, I can hardly say no after you’ve brought me this,” she said, pointing to the lemon cake. “Thank you, Jon, for everything.”

“Anytime,” he replied, “always.” And with a curt bow he left.

Sansa’s soup had gone cold in the meantime, but she was famished and finished it quickly. She would take her time with the lemon cake, though. The longer she savoured it, the longer she could distract herself from her fears.

When there was no cake left to keep her thoughts away from Bran, Sansa set the tray aside onto the nearby table and made an effort to look well enough to leave her chambers and face the outside world. In her current state, she could never be truly satisfied with her reflection in the looking glass.

It will do, decided Sansa, a true Lady wouldn’t fuss about her looks when her brother was on his deathbed.

Still, she prayed that on the way to Bran’s chambers she wouldn’t have an unfortunate encounter with Queen Cersei or even worse, Prince Joffrey. She didn’t have the strength in her to face the Royal family.

Sansa knocked softly on the chamber door. The sounds of footsteps followed and soon her father opened the door to let her in.

Bran was motionless, but with a peaceful expression on his face. His legs were covered with blankets and furs but still the memory of his injuries was not easy to shake. She did not immediately spot King Robert standing by her mother’s side, but when she did, her body broke into a curtsy almost instinctively.

“Your Grace.” He acknowledged her with a nod. Her voice drew her mother’s gaze away from her sleeping brother.

“Sansa,” she said worriedly, “you should be in bed.”

“No,” was Sansa’s reply. She couldn’t remember the last time she disagreed with her mother. “I had to come, you know I had to.”

It appeared that Catelyn did not have the desire to press it further, and she nodded, returning her attention to Bran. Sansa approached the bed with caution and put her hand over Bran's. It was reassuringly warm.

This was too high a price to pay in exchange for more time with my family, she thought. And King Robert could still call them South any day now, her mother would still be here to take care of Bran.

Standing there made her feel even more helpless than she did in the privacy of her own room. She did not know if she could bear it all for much longer. She had no more tears to cry and she felt hollow. Perhaps there was only so much sorrow that her body could physically express. It certainly wasn't enough for all that she carried in her heart.

Arya was hardly a stranger to sneaking around Winterfell after nightfall. She remembered one time particularly vividly when she left her chamber after everyone fell asleep and met Jon by the entrance to the family crypts. It was utterly terrifying but unforgettably exhilarating at the same time, the mixture of the two feelings always gave Arya a peculiar feeling in her stomach. She guessed that most people would find it unpleasant but she found that she enjoyed it. What they have set out to do today wasn't an adventure but more of a necessity.

They were all hurting and Arya needed Jon and Robb with her. And Sansa too, she wanted her there with all of them, like the old times they had before Sansa acquired her obsession with being a shining example of a Westerosi maiden. Before her friends started calling her Horseface and laughed about her behind Arya's back.

She knew that her sister would benefit from their company too. Although Arya was also convinced that Sansa wouldn't appreciate this particular arrangement of theirs. After all, it was so reckless. Something made Arya convinced that this time, Sansa would agree.

Arya was extremely careful when she walked the dark halls. She carried her shoes in her hands to minimise the noise from her footsteps and took Nymeria with her so the wolf could warn her if someone was approaching.

When she entered Sansa's room, Lady did not even stand up. Sansa's wolf simply lifted her head and assessed the visitors with her clever golden eyes.

Arya climbed onto Sansa's bed in order to get a better grip on her shoulders.

This will be interesting, Arya thought, *I hope I won't scare the living hell out of her...*

Arya was about to shake her sister awake but was stopped by Sansa's stirring.

“Come back to me, please, come back alive.” Her sister’s eyes were shut tightly as if she was in pain as she called out to some nightly fantasy of hers.

Arya felt sorry for Sansa who clearly couldn’t escape the horrors of her waking hours even in her sleep. Clearly, Bran was there in her dreams too.

“Sansa, wake up, you are having a nightmare.” Arya thought that she shook her gently, but Sansa’s awakening was followed by a rather loud gasp that suggested otherwise.

“Quiet! Get dressed, we are going for a walk.” Sansa tried to give her a deadly look, but her sleepy eyes failed to make it seem threatening.

“Are you out of your mind?” Her voice sounded like she had milk of the poppy before bed. It was certainly going to be difficult to knock sense into her at this hour. She wished one of her other siblings got the honour of escorting Sansa, but unfortunately, the sisters’ rooms were the closest to each other so naturally, Arya was the only one who could do the job with a minimal risk of detection.

“Come on, you will like it, I promise,” Arya grinned at her, hardly believing that her prim and proper sister was about to do something rather wicked.

“Fine, give me a minute.”

They left together with their direwolves, moving slowly through the long, convoluted halls of the Keep. It was mostly silent, but whenever there was even the smallest hint of noise Sansa always gripped Arya’s hand tightly. So tightly that Arya could feel her sister’s racing pulse.

“I hate you,” Sansa whispered when they were approaching the exit. Arya stuck her tongue out at her. Sansa rolled her eyes.

I guess some things never change, noted Arya to herself.

Jon and Robb waited for them outside with stacks of blankets and a pile of firewood. Beside them were three wolves. Ghost, Grey Wind and Bran’s nameless one.

Sansa looked puzzled at the sight of Bran’s pup who previously refused to leave the proximity of his master.

“It’s so Bran could be with us too,” Arya explained pensively, “at least like this.”

With heavy hearts, they started on their way towards the Wolfswood.

Chapter End Notes

I think I am low-key obsessed with people knocking?

Sorry about that haha.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The Stark children meet in the woods to talk and bond. They end up sleeping under the stars.

The time with her siblings causes Sansa to reflect on the uncertainty of the future that now seems less concrete than when she first received the letter.

Chapter Notes

Massive apologies for the delay in updating and lack of replies. I have been quite ill these last couple of days, but I am slightly better now so here it is.

Going towards the woods without a torch was certainly proving to be tricky as they could hardly see where they were going. Sansa clung onto her sister who moved forward fearlessly, clearly experienced in this type of midnight endeavours. Sansa tried to close her eyes and imagine her surroundings as if it was the middle of the day and that helped her keep up the pace when she opened her eyes again. The images in her head imprinted themselves onto the reality she was seeing, guiding the way. The night sky was beautiful, densely packed with glowing stars situated around the full moon centrepiece. Their only light source.

She wasn't as familiar with the woods that were covered in complete darkness by the overhanging canopies of leaves. Lady stayed close by her side and helped them through the numerous trunks and groves in the ground. Sansa wondered what it felt like to be a wolf with their sharper senses. As her vision failed her, Sansa tried to concentrate on other aspects of her surroundings. The crunch of the dry leaves under her feet and the soft rustle of the leaves above her as they moved with the breeze. The smell of the crisp air laced with wood and notes of moss. The excited, slightly ragged breathing of her sister. The quiet whispers of their wolves' paws hitting the ground over and over, almost in perfect synchrony.

It felt like they've spent a long time looking for a place to settle down but the small clearing that they found offered just enough space for them all to rest comfortably and lay their blankets to escape whatever moisture was seeped into the ground. Jon and Robb busied themselves with building a fire. They piled up a pyramid of firewood and outlined it with stones to prevent the fire from spreading outside of its intended area. Whilst Robb was making sure that everything was set up properly, Jon busied himself with producing the flame itself from a couple of stones and one of the more sturdier sticks that they found.

The flame caught on quickly, licking up and down the wood, growing stronger and stronger, fighting against the icy chill of the dark. Soon, it was burning up high into the air, distorting anything that lay beyond. A great amount of planning seemed to have gone into their clandestine meeting, for Jon and Robb's bags were very well stocked with various goods. They took out several bread loaves and half a round of hard cheese. They even managed to get some dried apples, plums and apricots. Sansa hoped that these weren't reserved for the Royal family specifically and that no one would notice some of the provisions going missing. Grey Wind, who ran off earlier came back carrying a rabbit in his mouth, which prompted the other wolves to go seek their own critters to feast on.

They enjoyed their food silently, each one lost in their own head although their thoughts all lead to the same places. Toasted bread with melted cheese warmed Sansa up in places where the heat of the fire couldn't reach. And it wasn't just the food itself. Although the Stark siblings often shared meals, this night felt special because it was the first time since what felt like forever when they all sought each other's company, needed it.

Arya was the first one to break the silence. "I bet the Lannisters did it," she declared. "They have all locked themselves into their quarters and hardly said a word of condolences to anyone."

"There is nothing that suggests their involvement, apart from the fact that they were around when it happened," Sansa pondered. "We all know how much Bran loved to climb and stones around here can be slippery. Blaming our tragedy on someone else would only cause trouble for Father..."

"Bran never fell before, though," added Robb. "And it is true that we can't exactly go around accusing the Queen or her brothers of what happened."

"Why would they wish to harm a child? It just makes no sense," confessed Sansa, "and I cannot even fathom one possible reason."

"Maybe he saw something that he wasn't supposed to see," offered Jon suddenly.

Sansa couldn't imagine the Queen doing anything untoward, but then again she was not meant to trust her. Not trusting someone and believing they have attempted to kill your brother were two different things though with a clear line between the two as far as Sansa was concerned. Besides, Cersei was a mother herself, how could she bring herself to harm another child unless it was to protect her own? None of her children was in danger, though, unlike Bran who would never be able to beat Prince Tommen with a sword ever again.

"Maybe they were plotting to kill the King," speculated Arya. "She would have murdered him on the day he arrived, right after he told Father that he wished to see Aunt Lyanna. If looks could kill, that is."

"Well if the Royal sigil is anything to go but, that might not be far from the truth. The Lannister lion looks like he is ready to devour the stag, with his open mouth and the raised claws," said Jon.

Everyone nodded without saying another word. Sansa was certainly out of ideas as to any explanation for what happened. It still all felt like one long nightmare that they were all

dreaming together, unable to wake up.

“I think the worst part of this whole thing is that we can do absolutely nothing to help anyone, even our Lady Mother will only be fine again if Bran wakes up,” said Sansa, her voice shaking. “And although I have hope that he will come back to us eventually, it would never be the same for him.”

“He will wake up, Sansa, he will,” Jon tried to assure her. “As Maester Luwin said, if he was going to die, he would have done so already. We must wait.”

“His dreams of being a Knight are over, he can’t even go to King’s Landing now and he has been counting down the days ever since Father told him he’d be able to meet Barristan the Bold.” Sansa sighed, visibly upset. “How can the Gods be so cruel?”

None of them had an answer for that.

“Perhaps the Gods have another purpose for Bran, something other than a life of the sword and the lance.” Robb’s tone betrayed the utter sincerity of his words.

Sansa certainly had many fantasies of her own, and if the letter was completely accurate, the price of those fantasies was certainly very high. It seemed that whatever the Gods had in store for the Stark children, it certainly wasn’t whatever they envisioned for themselves. Sansa imagined being a Queen to a beautiful King clad in gold and crimson, instead she was to be a Queen of a dark and brooding regent in a land where the colour crimson was only seen when their people spilled blood. Like Bran, Sansa thought that Arya wanted to be a Knight too, but as a girl born into a Great House of Westeros, that was next to impossible. Jon would soon go off to the Wall, and she couldn’t imagine what that was like at all. Most certainly cold and dangerous and hopefully, for Jon’s sake, at least a little bit like the stories.

Looking at Jon now, it was hard to figure out what would draw her to him when they reunite. Since she made an effort to reach out to him, she had seen his good heart and it gave her a promise of happiness even in the midst of all the death and destruction that the letter foretold. She wondered if the Sansa that ruled over winter guessed how conflicted she would feel upon receiving these written prophecies. What if her current actions actually brought her further away from the goal she was meant to achieve?

What could the Jon she would fall in love with see in her? Even now people at every turn told Sansa how much she looked like her mother, Catelyn Stark. Sansa’s face must remind Jon of her too and she certainly was not oblivious to how her mother treated him. Only a few weeks ago she was doing exactly the same thing, wishing Jon wasn’t there to shame her mother and make her feel dreadful. Jon clearly preferred girls like Arya. Feisty and wilful, the girls who could follow him to the Wall and beyond. Girls not like Sansa, the opposite.

Maybe in the future I will wield a sword, Sansa thought. As she imagined herself swinging a sword and wearing breeches, it all sounded absurd to her. The thought of stabbing someone makes me shudder. Violence isn’t the only way to leadership.

“I think we should sleep here.” Arya was definitely full of daring propositions as of late.

“I wish we could stay,” said Robb. “My heart feels lighter here, but the chance of discovery is too great. If they find any of us missing they’d be worried. Mother and Father have enough on their plate as it is.”

“That is precisely why we are unlikely to be found out, last time I saw her Mother was exhausted,” noted Sansa, glancing around her siblings. “She doesn’t leave Bran’s chambers and Father is too busy with preparations that usually fall on her shoulders. And if they see that we are not in our beds we can just say that we have all gone to the Godswood to pray together,”

Robb laughed, a rare sound in these surroundings. “Who are you and where have you taken my sister?” All of a sudden Sansa felt defensive.

“What? I’ve already gone through all the trouble of sneaking out in the first place, we’ve been lucky to avoid all the guards doing their rounds, we have no clear idea what time it is now so we have almost no chance of being back unseen. And I feel safe here, Lady will protect me.” She petted her direwolf’s head and the beast leant into her touch as if agreeing with her master’s words.

“I was going to go pray on the morrow, but I think it would mean so much more if we do it together,” suggested Jon. “Then if anyone should ask it wouldn’t even be a lie.”

“Well if we are going to sleep it is better to get to it,” said Robb, “the sun will be up soon.”

They put out the fire for fear of leaving it unattended, but they could still feel the heat radiating from the dying embers. Sansa curled into her blanket, trying to envelop herself in it completely. Due to the unplanned nature of it all, they had no pillows but the ground was soft and Sansa managed to use her arms to support her head quite comfortably. Lady scooted close to her, helping Sansa stay warm as much as what was left of their fire did.

The sky was no longer in its darkest shade. Far from it. The stars faded into a blur that was only a shade lighter than the rest of the space above her. Only the moon was still a distinct entity with a contrasting luminescence. The horizon was outlined with a thin strip of green, indicating that morning was catching up and would soon overtake the night.

Between wishes, for a good night between them, someone would always joke about something inconsequential which lead to more small talk and laughs. Thus, it took at least three attempts before they all finally decided to sleep. They used to share moments like these long ago before Sansa learned of what the word ‘bastard’ meant. She and Arya used to jump in bed with their two wonder brothers and giggle until Arya was taken away to sleep in her little cot.

Soon, Sansa heard the soft, steady breathing of her sister who slept beside her. Sansa couldn’t fall into any sort of slumber, though. As tired as she was, she was also rather cold and that distracted her. The heat from the fire was not as strong now, and Sansa was always fidgety in bed so her blanket soon failed to provide adequate insulation for all the heat she managed to salvage within it fled to her surroundings as soon as she shifted her position.

She tried practising her sums in her head. Arya often liked to remind her that she was better than Sansa at managing figures and although she never admitted to her sister that it was true, to herself she could afford to agree. At least with sewing and embroidery, the end product was more beautiful than anything she stated with. With arithmetic it wasn't the same, though, it was all just combinations of the same thing. She could certainly understand its necessity but that didn't help her to be more proficient at the skill. Still, if she wanted to be a good Queen she would have to be able to run her own household, thus practice was paramount. Sansa hoped that the utter dullness of it all would put her to sleep, but as she juggled more complex numbers in her mind she found herself to be even more awake than before.

A rustling to her left startled her as Sansa assumed she was the only one struggling with her consciousness. When she turned her head to investigate the source of the noise, she saw Jon trying, and failing, to pull out the blanket from underneath him with as little hassle as possible.

"Jon, are you alright?" She whispered.

"I just was a little too hot," he explained, "that's a lie. I just thought... I thought I would practice for when I go off North. Benjen said that sometimes Rangers of the Night's Watch have to sleep rough in quite harsh conditions."

"Your devotion to the Watch is admirable." She smiled to show him that she meant it, although she doubted that he was actually watching. They weren't quite in the direct line of sight of each other. He did not reply.

"May I have your blanket then please?" She felt a shiver go over her. "I'm rather cold."

He stood up and walked over to her on his tiptoes, careful not to wake anyone up with his movements. The wolves were the only ones who stirred, but even they soon went back to their original positions of rest. Jon bent down to gently put the blanket over her, and Sansa used her hands to push it under her slightly so the whole thing became something like a cocoon.

"You can wake me up if you change your mind about the blanket," she tried to assure him.

"I won't change my mind," Jon said stubbornly.

Sansa thought that it wasn't just the blanket that he was talking about.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The Starks prepare to go their separate ways. Sansa says her goodbyes.

Chapter Notes

And I'm back! My sincerest apologies for this extremely long delay but in short, life happened and I just couldn't find the strength to do all the life stuff and separate my favourite cinnamon rolls in this story.

The plot is going to roll much quicker from now on.

Enjoy <3

A sennight passed without any good news that concerned Bran's state. Sansa visited his chambers regularly, to see her brother and to speak to her mother too. Lady Catelyst couldn't be found elsewhere in the castle, after all. Her Lady Mother could scarcely offer up any words that weren't related to Bran, and Sansa couldn't blame her. Bran looked like a ghost of his former self, with hollow cheeks and sickly pale skin. She felt tears well up in the corners of her eyes every time she made the journey to his chambers, she could see from her mother's own swelled and bloodshot eyes that it was even worse for her. She lived in constant awareness of her own son's life hanging on a single thread of fate, a thread that could unravel at any given moment. Unlike the rest of the Starks, Catelyst had no reprieve from the gravity of Bran's condition, no other task to distract her.

Still, a part of Sansa wishes that she could confide in her mother about her own worries, as insignificant as they seemed compared to what Lady Stark faced. Every day Joffrey seemed less and less like a Prince from her songs and stories and more like a regular Prince, just a boy that was lucky enough to be born with a King and a Queen as his parents. He wasn't without his own merits, of course, for Prince Joffrey knew how to make a young girl blush when he so wished with his pretty words and even prettier smiles. But something about the ease with which he offered all of that set Sansa on edge. She did not feel like his compliments were meant just for her, for they would be just as appropriate if they were addressed to any other girl.

It was always "your hair looks pretty today, Lady Sansa" or "you look beautiful, my Lady." He never mentioned how unusual her particular hair colour was, he never remarked how one of her particular outfits made the blue in her eyes stand out. It was all so well practised, with

his intonation just right to compel and ensnare. Sansa supposed that it worked on many a girl before her, and it almost worked on her too. It completely worked on her, if she was being honest, at least in the beginning. But now? Now, Sansa wasn't so sure and she wished with her whole heart that her mother was able to help her make sense of it all.

Even if her mother wasn't otherwise preoccupied, what could Sansa possibly tell her? That she was having second thoughts about entering into a Royal betrothal because she was prophesied to marry a man everyone believes to be her half-brother? That she was going to come to love the boy that tormented her mother from the very day that he was brought to Winterfell? No, it was all out of the question. She wondered whether the Sansa who sent her the letter knew how much daily torment she brought upon her past self. Sansa hoped that her suffering would eventually reduce that of her family's.

A small price to pay, she thought, trying to reassure herself.

Another thing Sansa noticed about Joffrey was that despite his perfect manners with her, the mask of propriety slipped when conversation rose above the trivial. This observation struck her during their walk together that happened the day before yesterday. He had found her just as she was leaving Bran's chambers, visibly distraught. His words were sweet as was his attempt to comfort her, like everything that came out of his mouth when he spoke to her, and just as rehearsed. The only words that did not seem prepared in advance were the ones that made Sansa recoil from him.

"Even death would be more merciful than the fate your brother will endure if he wakes up," he said decidedly. Sansa was polite enough not to reply, but her heart burned with disagreement.

Those comments were hardly relevant in terms of the bigger picture. Sansa always knew that she would have to do her family proud in her marriage, and there wasn't a greater honour than to be a Queen. She couldn't quite imagine what the repercussions would be if she ever openly refused. House Stark would seem weak to the whole realm for failing to secure something that was so freely given.

Before she was betrothed to Joffrey, she was always quite calm about the idea of an arranged marriage. Her parents loved her dearly and Sansa was always calm in the knowledge that whoever they picked would hold up her Father's standards of honour and good character and her Mother's standards for gentleness and a 'good' name.

Joffrey had the best name that the realm could offer. But was that enough? It certainly wasn't for Sansa. But if she put her heart against the Seven Kingdoms on some imaginary scales, the answer did not present itself so clearly. What was her own heart worth against thousands of loyal subjects that would surely love her as their Queen?

So far, there was no way to get out of this betrothal, and even if she could do it one way or another Sansa was too high born to remain unmarried for too long. She smiled at the knowledge that suitors would surely line up to beg her Father for her hand. There was no escaping it, truly. Even if Jon was to be her husband, he definitely won't be her first.

Sansa was determined to get her lover from a song, and someday she will do it on her own terms. But that day was far from the present, as she feared.

The whole castle was in a stupor ever since Bran's body was discovered below the Tower. All joy left the walls. The merry atmosphere of many feasts and celebrations that occurred within couldn't be sensed even in the echoes that bounced off the castle stones. Every day began and ended in the same way. Sansa listened to Septa Mordane or Maester Luwin go on about some noble family that would be present in King's Landing, their sigil and their words. Her mind was far away, but from time to time her subconsciousness delivered a right answer from her lips when it was demanded.

She still visited Bran and Mother every day, and every day he seemed to grow weaker and weaker. He lost a lot of weight too, despite the strange honey water concoction that Catelyn administered day and night. Sansa did not dare to think how Bran would fare if she did not feed him so diligently.

And thus, the days trickled down to the point of their departure.

Winterfell swarmed with people that moved along slowly but surely as if they grew unaccustomed to animated activities in these weeks of mourning. For Sansa it also felt strange to move about quickly inside the Keep, trying to make sure that everything was in order.

Leaving Robb, Rickon and her mother behind weighed heavily on Sansa's conscience. She knew that as soon as she left her home, her every decision would need to be thought through long and hard to see whether it would have any far reaching consequences for her and her family. As she bid them farewell, none of them believed it to be the last time so she couldn't afford to embrace them like it was. She will create another timeline for them, one where they did not have to die. These goodbyes would not be forever.

She had one more person to see, Jon. And she knew someone who was sure to be aware of his whereabouts.

In all her newfound excitement, Sansa forgot to knock on her sister's door. As she peeked through, she was met with Arya's horrified gaze as she looked up from something long, thin and pointy. The adoring look that her sister had bestowed upon the object was gone the moment she spotted Sansa. Arya recovers from her trance quickly and shoves what was obviously some sort of strange sword behind her back. It wasn't really fast enough to hide the nature of the object and unfortunately for Arya it was too late to erase this revelation from Sansa's memory.

When Arya draws her attention away from Sansa, it is to glare at her wolf as if Arya was annoyed at Nymeria because she did not warn her master of the incoming 'danger'. Arya never looked at Sansa with fear in her eyes, and although that emotion was only fleeting on her face it was still unmistakably there. Whatever her dangerous toy was, it was certainly very precious to Arya.

“What do you want?” Arya asked pointedly. It seemed like she wasn’t going to be the first one to address the obvious issue that was revealed by Sansa’s intrusion.

“Have you seen Jon?” She did not have time to argue with her sister about whatever she was hiding.

“He just left,” said Arya, her hand squeezing protectively around the hilt of the sword.

A strained silence descended between the two sisters as Sansa put the facts before her together. The guarded look on Arya’s face showed that Sansa made the right conclusions.

“I won’t tell anyone about that thing... Whatever it is,” Sansa assured her, “Just don’t kill anyone with it, please.” Arya’s whole body exudes disbelief.

Arya’s room was a mess. It appeared as if her wolf was helping her pack for their trip ahead, and her sister wasn’t nearly as done as she was supposed to be by this time of day.

“I’ll help you pack when I come back. Don’t make too much of a mess meanwhile, if you please.” Arya glared her out of her room.

Sansa found Jon near the stables as he stood in a small alcove, hidden from view of most. As she followed the line of his gaze, she saw her uncle Benjen speaking with several men, undoubtedly making the last preparations for their much-delayed departure.

He was clearly deep in thought when Sansa touched his shoulder gently. As even that light gesture made him flinch. When he looks over at her the regret at his reaction is seen clearly in his expression. It was replaced almost immediately with a quick, but warm smile that Sansa had come to associate with him in the weeks that they have grown closer.

Sansa lowers her hand into her dress pocket, running her fingers along the carefully folded gift that she made for Jon. Her heart fluttered with a strange sort of elation, one that she shouldn’t be feeling in this situation. She felt it all the same. It probably meant much more to her than it would to him, anyhow, for Jon now lived in blissful ignorance of his fate and of their fates that would eventually be entertained and tangled up in each other forever.

Sansa has never been to a tourney before, but she always imagined that this is how Ladies felt when they gave their favour to a handsome and valiant knight. It wasn’t her favour that Sansa was giving away, though, it was more like a promise. A pledge of a future love that she could not quite give just yet.

JON

He shouldn’t have been so surprised by the fact that Sansa sought him out. They have spoken on so many occasions over the past fortnight that those occurrences no longer seemed remarkable. He should have been the one to find her, to say goodbye after he did the same with Arya.

He felt ashamed of the reason he ran from her chambers, retracting his fist moments before it would have hit her heavy door. But as he imagined Sansa's face beyond the wooden barrier, he couldn't help but remember the venomous words that were thrown at him from a face with almost identical features. His encounter with Catelyn Stark left Jon feeling raw and bitter and like a coward he ran.

It seemed like an irrational fear now, after weeks of easy conversation between him and the eldest daughter of House Stark. It wouldn't have been before of course, given the years that Sansa spent modelling her own behaviour towards Jon on her mother's. He avoided saying goodbye, just in case the last words were ones of spite.

As he looked at Sansa now, he couldn't be more wrong. She looked radiant with her cheeks stained bright pink from running. Her usually perfect hairstyle was slightly dishevelled, giving her a more wild, carefree look that Jon thought suited her immensely. Her fiddling brought his attention to her dainty hands that fiddled with a piece of dark cloth.

"I made this for you." She extended both of her arms towards him, holding out the fabric for his inspection.

As he took it in his hand, Jon immediately noted how smooth it felt against his fingers. The colour was a deep black, as dark as a crow's wing. Adorning the middle of the cloth were two wolves, dancing around each other, chasing each other's tails in a never-ending cycle. One with grey fur and golden eyes and another that stood out even more with his red eyes and white fur. Ghost, and Lady. The stitching was breathtaking, as Sansa's work was often said to be. It was all impeccable, save for a jagged white border that ran along one side of the handkerchief. But even that imperfection, upon close inspection, was revealed to be Winterfell's silhouette if one was looking at it from afar as if they left its walls as Jon was about to do now.

"I wanted you to have something that reminded you of home," she explained. Jon was still taken aback by her kindness and her thoughtful gift. "And for you to remember me too, even if it's only once in a while."

Jon thinks he will keep the little beautiful cloth with him always, close to his heart where it could warm his soul if he ever got homesick. He wondered how the girl he barely spared a thought towards was now almost as important to him as Arya. If Sansa could make such a big impact on him in such a short time, what could she have done if they were never put on diverging paths?

"Thank you, Sansa, this meant more to me than you know." He hoped that the sincerity that he put into his voice came through to her.

"The Wall is lucky to have someone as brave as you guarding it Jon, I wish you well there."

Before he left Arya, Jon told her that sometimes different roads lead to the same castle. No matter how hard he tried he somehow couldn't imagine Sansa at Castle Black. As for him, a sworn brother could never leave his post for any significant length of time, so they were unlikely to meet again anytime soon, if ever.

“I remember my promise, I will write.”

“And I will, too, you can count on that.” She always had a way of saying things, one that made you believe every word that came out of her mouth. Jon thought that it would certainly serve her well where she was going.

Benjen called him over from where he stood, finally noticing Jon in his fairly poor hiding place. His time in Winterfell was over.

“Goodbye, Jon.” Sansa barely even had to go on her tiptoes to give him a whisper of a kiss on the cheek, something that she hasn’t done since they were both little children when it wasn’t forbidden or improper.

If Sansa found the situation strange, her smile certainly didn’t show it. “Goodbye, Sansa.”

As Jon walked away from his old life to greet his next and last he allowed himself one look back. Sansa still stood in the same place and watched him leave. Something glistened on her cheek, just below her eyes.

A trick of light, perhaps. Surely Sansa Stark would not cry at his departure?

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Kingsroad incident takes a different turn when Sansa decides to intervene in the squabble between Arya and Joffrey.

Chapter Notes

Ok, I debated with myself for a long time how to approach this chapter.
Again, apologies for the delay.

Also the longest chapter so far.

Sansa was not a proficient rider. Now, as tears streamed down her face she could hardly see the road back to the holdfast. Her arm was bleeding all over her best dress, causing her body to shake in pain. She wished that she did not refuse more of Joffrey's wine for it would surely numb her agony. She wondered how soldiers could ride off to war and fight despite being wounded, she felt like she was about to collapse. The ribbon she tied below her elbow helped reduce the bleeding, but it made riding uncomfortable.

This is what Sansa got for jumping between Nymeria, her sister's wolf and Joffrey's sword. She was bruised and bleeding. Joffrey was knocked out in front of the tree that Sansa pushed him into and Arya was gone, together with her wolf, she disappeared into the woods leaving Sansa to fend for herself. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest, reminding her to focus on the road ahead.

Sansa was a poor excuse for a saviour. Joffrey could wake up to tell the world that she pushed him into a tree and made him faint in the middle of the woods where anyone could stumble upon him and murder the Crown Prince of the Seven Kingdoms as he lay unconscious. All her fault.

She should have gone with Arya in the first place, but no. What daughter of a Great House could refuse an afternoon spent with the Queen and her only daughter, a Princess? Myrcella was a sweet girl, judging by the little glimpses that Sansa saw when the Royal family stayed at Winterfell. It would have been a worthwhile afternoon and perhaps she'd realise that Queen Cersei is not as menacing as she was professed to be. That's why she refused to go look for rubies with Arya and that is why they were in this mess.

Offending the Queen and Princess Myrcella by refusing to go ride in their litter would have been less of a disaster than this, thought Sansa.

Now there was no litter and no rubies found. She should have gone exploring with Arya and found something that belonged to Jon's father, she could even send it to him when they reached King's Landing. He wouldn't know of their significance, of course, he couldn't know yet. They would simply be precious stones that belonged to a fallen Prince, the kidnapper of their aunt.

It was a struggle to keep her eyes open. They were sore from crying and the speed of her galloping horse caused dust and the wind to harass her eyes whenever she opened them. Sansa was exhausted and it seemed as if she'd never reach the rest of the travelling party. She hoped she wasn't lost altogether, then all their lives were forfeited for sure.

Just as Sansa was about to give up, the inn in which she broke her fast with Septa Mordane that morning peaked out of a row of tall, bushy trees. Sansa dismounted and tied her horse to one of the trees, leaving the beast only with a promise to come back and set it free later.

Sansa prayed for her father to be back from his ride with King Robert, she needed to see him first, but the Stark tents were found deeper into the camp, and her bleeding arm was certainly bound to draw attention. Her only salvation was the blanket that she packed before she rode out with Prince Joffrey, just in case they stopped to lay on the grass. She couldn't risk soiling her finest blue silks, so naturally, she was prepared for such an occasion. Now her dress was utterly ruined and the blanket was the only thing in Sansa's disposal that could possibly mask that fact. She threw the brown cloth over her head and drew it over her shoulders so it almost covered her whole body. Perhaps this way she would be mistaken for a nameless serving girl.

The guards' rounds were fairly predictable, which helped Sansa navigate through a labyrinth of tents and supply stores unnoticed until she reached her father's tent that was marked distinctly with the direwolf sigil of her house.

Eddard Stark was not inside. Sansa was glad that the Stark guards outside let her in without any questions when she simply informed them of her intentions to wait for her father. She requested for boiled water to be brought to her, as well as a change of clothes. Sansa untied the ribbon around her elbow and pulled up the sleeve, now pierced with little holes that marked the spots where Nymeria's teeth tore into it. Her arm had matching marks that hardly bled at this point. Her arm was even paler than usual.

Sansa was horrified to think what would have happened to Joffrey's arm if he received the same treatment. Nymeria's jaws did not even snap hard around her own arm when the wolf bit her. The wolf's reflexes were lightning fast as she let go of Sansa's arm and was off chasing after Arya all in a matter of seconds. Taking care of wounds was harder than Sansa imagined it to be. In her stories, the beautiful princesses always knew what to do when the love of their life was injured. Sansa, on the other hand, was struggling to take care of herself. She dunked the first cloth she found into the boiled water and poked it into the depth of its vessel with a stick. The small cauldron still gave off small wisps of steam that felt too hot on Sansa's skin as her face hovered above it. Fishing the soaked cloth out was also an issue for Sansa's disturbed coordination and focus. When she finally did it she found it way too hot to handle. In an ideal situation, she would have asked for boiled wine and poured it straight over

her wound to prevent it from festering, but Sansa was convinced that she would have passed out from the pain. The bite itself was painful enough, even hours after the incident and she doubted that she could take any more of this torture. Besides, asking for this amount of wine would draw attention to her that she certainly did not need.

The arrival of her father felt like a blessing. Unlike the guards that stood vigil at the door of the tent, Eddard Stark noticed that there was something wrong with his eldest daughter immediately. Although that most likely wasn't due to their lack of awareness, but mostly because of several bloodied cloths that Sansa already managed to accumulate around her.

"Sansa, what is the meaning of all this?" He was clearly shocked by the sight of her, still in her bloodied dress, but her father did not sound cross.

"I can explain," said Sansa, whimpering. But before she could muster any more coherent words, she broke down in tears, prompting Eddard to rush to her and take Sansa in his arms.

"It's alright, sweet girl, no one can harm you now, tell me who did this to you."

"Joffrey." His eyes immediately hardened with anger and reduced to two menacing slits. "No, no, he didn't hurt me Father, but you must send someone to help him, he is in the woods near the river. Not too far from here. He fainted... Just please let me show you where he is so we can bring him back, and I promise I will tell you everything later."

"Very well, Sansa, I will send out someone to scout while we get you a maester and a new dress instead of this one.

"No, no maesters." She stared at him pointedly, a look that communicated her fear without any extraneous words. Her father simply nodded and exited the tent, already issuing command left and right.

When he returned with her Septa the instructions were clear.

"Tend to her arm as much as you can and speak to no one," said Eddard to the older woman.

When Arya was found four days later by her father's men, Sansa felt immense relief. The woods were not a safe place for a girl as young as her sister. Even if she was as wild as the direwolf that ran away with her. Joffrey's clash with Arya's wooden stick and the tree left him unconscious for most of the time that was spent searching for her sister. He refused to see Sansa, of course, even though it was clear that he did not remember the specifics that led to his fall and a rather unnatural form of sleep. If he had any recollection, someone would have surely already laid the allegations against Sansa. Yet there was no news at all, save for the fact that the Prince finally woke up just hours before Arya was found.

Sansa was glad that she divulged the entirety of what happened to her father. In some sense, it only served to increase her sense of worry for attacking the Crown Prince was one of the most serious crimes that this realm acknowledged, even if the attack was a result of a blatant provocation. Sansa hoped that Arya's age would earn her a few concessions in this matter and

surely it was even worse for Joffrey to attack a Lady of a Great House and one younger than himself at that. It was despicable, really, and not at all knightly.

As soon as Arya was brought back to the rest of her family, she was dragged off to answer for her actions by the Queen's men. Father left to see her too, but the worried look that he gave Sansa made it clear that she will not escape this.

"Come with me, child, the King will want to hear from you too, that much is certain. Go make yourself presentable and do something about that arm of yours before they all see you."

Her last couple of nights were spent piecing together a story that would most soothe Arya's punishment as well as the tensions between the Royal family and House Stark. Sansa was glad that her father agreed that it would be best for Sansa to disguise her injury, that was why she decided to put silk gloves with lace detailing that disguised the wolf bite without seeming inappropriate for the current weather as well as a long sleeve dress made from a sturdy blend of cotton and silk. Sansa also kept away from Lady in these turbulent times. Her wolf's displays of worry seemed too obvious as Lady tried to lick the wound on Sansa's arm that was inflicted by her wolf-sister. The silk cuffs of the gloves were the best possible replacement for bandages that Sansa couldn't wear for fear of attention.

Vayon Poole escorted her to the audience chamber. Even before they entered, Sansa could hear her sister's screaming "liar", an accusation that was clearly directed at the Prince.

As Arya told her version of events, Sansa hung onto her every word in order to match her own version of events as closely as possible to that of her sister's. Without using those common turns of phrases that Arya picked up from all her smallfolk friends, of course. Trying to remember everything from Arya's account was quite hard when certain members of the audience couldn't help but laugh and Renly Baratheon, the King's brother was the loudest by far. His reaction was deemed so inappropriate that the King asked him to leave. Sansa did not find the situation that amusing, a conflict of this scale and between her sister and her betrothed as well. Sometimes Sansa thought that she had the worst luck.

Joffrey's version of events was blatantly astonishing. It seemed as if he did not actually remember half of the events that transpired and instead of admitting the truth decided to fill all that empty space in his head with lies and folly. Now he projected his imagination to the whole audience chamber and the congregated nobles, guards and servants soaked up his words as if they were taken right from the pages of holy scriptures. In Joffrey's story, Arya and the butcher's boy were villains and he was all but an innocent victim.

The King was visibly displeased and expressed his annoyance at the two contradicting stories. It was Arya's word against Joffrey's. Sansa knew that her time had come at last. Her knees started to shake with more fervour than before, as she stepped out and in front of the gathered crowd at her father's command.

She looked quickly between Arya and Joffrey who both stared at her expectantly, each waiting for Sansa to corroborate their version of the events. One of them was bound to be left disappointed.

“I was just so scared. Joffrey took out his sword and said that he was going to hurt Mycah, and Arya was there too and I was just so scared that Arya would be hurt too, Your Grace.” Joffrey looked down at her, anger and contempt already visible in his eyes. “They just had these wooden sticks with them, Your Grace, and not swords like Prince Joffrey. He wanted to protect my sister from the butcher’s boy but they were just playing. That was until the Prince took it too seriously, of course, I thank him for being so eager to defend my family of course. But it was all a misunderstanding, Arya only hit him when Prince Joffrey threatened her friend. And I was just so afraid for both of them that I stepped in, in order to push them away from each other. The Crown Prince had his sword and he was chasing Arya, and it didn’t seem like a game anymore so I pushed them away, but I am so sorry, Your Grace.” She started sobbing right there and then, for all to see.

“I pushed too hard,” she continued, “and Prince Joffrey hit a tree with the back of his head, and fell, and that’s when I went to get help.” “No, there was a wolf,” protested Joffrey, “that wild wolf attacked me, it was about to bite off my face!”

“I am sorry, my Prince, but you are most likely confused from the fall, it is my fault, of course, I hope you can accept my sincerest apologies.” Sansa broke into the best curtsy she could muster with her buckling legs.

When she looked over at Arya, her sister gave her a pained, sloppy smile that was stained with tears. Sansa could swear that the unfamiliar glint that she spotted in her sister’s eyes was something akin to pride.

“I want her punished,” said Queen Cersei. Sansa’s heart fell and her feet froze to the floor as her muscles became rigid with dread. “She is as wild as that direwolf of hers. Hitting my boy with a stick.” Even though she realised that the Queen wanted to punish Arya and not Sansa, her fear was not completely extinguished.

“Joffrey was no saint in all of this, children fight, that’s no surprise. He might argue that he is a man grown but all I see is a boy defeated by a little girl with a stick and a tree” said the King, “I’m sorry Ned, my son gave your eldest a Hell of a scare. Why don’t we all move on from this? I will discipline my son and you will discipline your youngest.”

“And what of the wolf?” The Queen’s question had me worried for Nymeria, but it seemed that Arya’s wolf was nowhere to be found since the incident.

“Didn’t you hear what Ned’s eldest said? The wolf didn’t even touch our son, and either way, it’s gone now so let’s all leave this alone.”

From across the room, both Joffrey and the Queen shot unadulterated looks of contempt towards Sansa.

“And the betrothal? How can you let this girl marry our son when she slanders him so?” The King looked at Sansa’s father wearily, he was now in a difficult position where he was sure to offend either his wife or his dearest friend.

“Let’s discuss this tomorrow, shall we, when the waters have calmed,” suggested the King diplomatically.

“She is a liar, covering for her dirty wild sister,” screamed Joffrey. In all honesty, hearing that hurt Sansa deeply when it was coming from the mouth of the boy who looked like someone out of her dream. A boy she admired not too long ago.

Maybe Joffrey looked like everything she ever wanted, but he certainly wasn’t that underneath. Sansa held back her tears, held her head high as she curtsied out of the room and wore her new title like armour.

Sansa Stark, a liar, I guess I could be something worse, she thought.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Sansa receives news from her father. The Stark sisters search for Nymeria.

Chapter Notes

So I finally got this done. Thank you all so much for reading.

I'm just getting into a regular lecture schedule and I'm trying new patterns of writing that will hopefully get you guys more reliable updates.

Enjoy <3

Sansa

The moment Arya embraced her and whispered a thank you against her chest would be forever carved into Sansa's memory. She'd always remember her surprise at the strength in her little sister's arms in that moment. Somehow Arya was able to translate some of that physical energy into an emotional kind and give it to Sansa, she really needed it too, it was certainly terrifying to challenge the words of a Crown Prince in front of his whole family. Sansa hoped she'd never have to do it again.

Arya seemed intensely relieved at how the situation was resolved, although that relief was painfully short-lived when the sisters heard the news about Arya's friend, Mycah, who was reportedly run down by Joffrey's personal guard, the terrifying Hound. So when her sister couldn't help but shed an angry tear for her deceased friend, Sansa cried with her. Her sister's tears swiftly turned into a vengeful intent, and if the looks she gave Sandor Clegane were anything to go by, Sansa was sure that Arya was entertaining fantasies of stabbing the man with that sword that Jon gave her.

Gods, she hadn't thought of him that much during all this confusion and worry that surrounded Arya's disappearance. She wondered whether he was still on his way to the wall, whether he was safe and content there, perhaps even happy. She certainly wished for him to find his calling there, at least for the time being. In the letter's timeline, Jon served in the Watch, so it must have been instrumental in making him the man that her alternate self fell in love with, so Sansa was convinced that this part of his life experience should be preserved. The Night's Watch was a mystery to her, although she did enjoy some of the stories that were written about the ancient order that Jon was about to join, they weren't exactly her favourite.

But if it was such a noble calling like those stories showed it to be, Sansa was sure that Jon would be able to write to her soon. Her only fear was that such frequent letter writing would be some sort of privilege there. Ravens were probably in high demand at Castle Black since the Watch always seemed to need new men these days. Would they even be able to spare one for a boy recruit?

They were camped by the Kingsroad again, and Sansa was in the usual Stark tent that was well-kept, as befitting the status of her family. Although now whenever she looked upon the makeshift walls of the tent, the memory of being scared and bleeding within it came back to her. They haven't progressed much farther since their last stop, the weather conditions have not been ideal and their progress had been hindered by several supply carts becoming stuck in the dirt of the road. Sansa figured that they could still easily reach the location of Rhaegar's final battle on horseback from their encampment within several hours of speedy riding.

Her sister was off having extra lessons with Septa Mordane as punishment for what transpired between her and Joffrey. Their father would have let her get away with everything if he could, speculated Sansa, but under the watchful eye of the Queen that would have been extremely difficult to orchestrate without further repercussions.

When Sansa broke her fast with the Septa, she casually mentioned how Arya absolutely hated the military history of Westeros. Their instructor seemed very interested in that detail, which told Sansa that there was a good chance that Arya's lessons would be covering exactly that. Of course, that topic was one of the few that her sister could stomach without constant complaining and fidgeting, one could say that she loved it, even.

"Sansa?" Her father's voice interrupted her thoughts. "I have to speak to you about something extremely important."

"What is it, Father?" Sansa had a good idea of the subject of this conversation and she was expecting her father to bring it up for some time now.

"I have spoken to King Robert in detail about what happened between your sister and Prince Joffrey. You must understand, he isn't too happy about the outcome, but because of Queen Cersei's insistence it is very likely that your engagement to Joffrey will be dissolved for the time being." Sansa's face fell. She wasn't expecting that to happen so soon. Sansa Stark, a discarded girl. As much as she felt let down by Joffrey since the indecent with Arya and her wolf, her pride still throbbed with pain at the news.

"Hardly anyone knew about this arrangement, Sansa, and I have got the King's assurance that his household will stay quiet about this as well. You shouldn't worry at all, that boy tried to hurt your own blood and I am sure we will find you other suitors that will make wonderful husbands for you."

Sansa nodded her agreement. She felt silly for getting upset at what her father told her, even if it was momentary. After all, it really did not matter what other men thought of her, she was destined for another, after all, and perhaps it would have been better if no one else wanted to marry her at all.

“I’m sorry for letting you down,” was all Sansa could say. Although she obviously did not regret what she did for Arya, she could see how her actions put her father’s position as Hand of the King under scrutiny.

“You have nothing to apologise for, although it might not have seemed like that in that moment, you did us all proud when you spoke up, Sansa.” He smiled down at her reassuringly and as always, that smile calmed the storm of emotions that was previously gaining strength within her. “I know that this was probably all you’ve ever wanted, so from what I have gathered, you might still be Queen someday. Cersei and Joffrey will forget their rage eventually and things may fall into place again.”

So it wasn’t over, after all. She still looked happy in front of Eddard Stark, he must have gone to great efforts to ensure that a royal union was not completely off the cards for his eldest daughter, so she let him believe that it was what she wanted too now.

“I understand, I will try to avoid causing you any more trouble, although I believe Arya may be even wilder than before now,” said Sansa with a quiet, ladylike laugh.

“Yes, I have a feeling she will be. Hopefully, we can find something to distract her within King’s Landing so she doesn’t try and get back at Prince Joffrey.” Her father returned her smile and in his expression, Sansa could see just how well he knew Arya’s temperament. He didn’t look severe, which made Sansa think that a little part of Eddard Stark was somewhat looking forward to the potential antics of his youngest daughter. “You should go to your sister, I believe her punish... additional lessons are going to be over soon.”

“As you wish, father.” By the time she left the tent, Eddard was already seated at a makeshift table in the far corner of the tent, ready to begin work.

“Nymeria!” Arya shouted into the depth of the forest.

“Nymeria!” Sansa echoed.

Since the King expressed little interest in their wolves since Joffrey’s accident, Arya and Sansa decided that they would risk going back to the scene to see if they could find Arya’s wolf. Sansa’s sister hardly ever showed fear, but since they have been at the task for several hours without even a howl, Arya’s face now showed unmistakable signs of worry. Sansa did not doubt that Nymeria was safe somewhere.

“It’s no use, Arya, if she was around here somewhere she would have found us already. Come on, let’s have a little rest and then we can ride a little further.” Sansa gestured to a little alcove in the forest where a large, thick tree looked like a good spot to rest their backs against.

Sansa unpacked the blanket from the horse’s back as well as some food that she took from the encampment. It wasn’t much, but she was hungry from the riding and tired from the constant shouting so the cheese with fresh bread and local fruit looked extremely appetising. She was sure her sister was famished too, Arya always had a bigger appetite and the only

times she let food go to waste was probably when she chose to throw it at Sansa's face instead.

They sat together quietly, Sansa was stroking her own wolf absentmindedly and Arya was painfully missing hers. When Arya let out a tortured sigh, Sansa felt it too.

"We'll find her, I'm sure of it," said Sansa to try and lift her sister's spirits. Arya only nodded, but her eyes were still boring holes into a single spot on the ground.

Suddenly, Lady shifted under Sansa's palm and her ears pricked up. However, the direwolf did not move. She simply whimpered in place and looked up at Sansa pleadingly.

"Oh you poor thing, do you want me to take you off the leash? I guess there is no harm in that here." Lady started shaking her head in approval and licked Sansa's cheek as she untied the leash. Lady bolted away into the darkening depth of the woods as soon as she was free.

"Lady! No!" It was no use, her usually timid wolf was already out of sight. Running in long skirts proved troublesome and Sansa was already far behind her sister who sprinted towards Lady with reckless abandon.

The last time something like this happened, I got the letter in the Godswood, remembered Sansa, but surely there wouldn't be another one. Weirwoods are very rare in these parts.

When Sansa finally caught up to her sister she was completely out of breath and panting, the hem of her dress was horrifyingly filthy from the dirt of the wood. She was rarely this physically exhausted, to the point of having double vision for there was Arya with not just one wolf, but two.

Sansa was embarrassed by how long she took to figure it out.

"Lady, you found her!" She hugged her wolf around the neck and nuzzled her cheek into Lady's fur. "I should have let you go sooner."

It looked like Arya was squeezing the soul out of Nymeria, but somehow the wolf did not seem to mind. When Arya let finally let go of Nymeria, it was Lady's turn to receive the same treatment.

"Alright, Arya, go easy on her," protested Sansa playfully. "Let's get you all back to camp."

The ride back was slower as they had to make sure that both wolves were at a safe distance from the horses. Strangely, the horses seemed to have minded Lady far less than Nymeria, perhaps because Sansa often walked with Lady on a leash around the camp and the horses did not learn to fear her.

Septa Mordane and Ned Stark were there to greet them on their arrival, they both looked like they were about to scold them both for taking so long. They did not even have time to say anything before they spotted the two wolves trailing behind the sisters. Only Eddard was happy at the sight. When Septa Mordane finally recovered and began a sentence, their father silenced her with another look.

“We are leaving again on the morrow, make sure your things are packed and that those wolves of yours do not cause any more trouble.” He hugged them both and muzzled Arya’s hair. He hadn’t done that to Sansa in years, on her own insistence, since she wanted her hair to be as perfect as possible. Although now it was probably a far cry from ideal since she spent the day riding.

Sansa was sore all over, the pain reminded her why she hated the activity so much. Her instructors always told her that it gets better if ‘she becomes one with the horse’ but that always sounded kind of ridiculous to her. Why would she want to become one with a horse? She was Sansa Stark of Winterfell, the wolf blood ran within her.

That night sleep did not come easy for Sansa and Arya wiggled beside her, rotating her pillow and shifting her weight constantly.

“You know what, Sansa, I guess you are not the worst sister ever,” said Arya without even a hint of sleep in her voice.

“Coming from you, that is very high praise indeed,” said Sansa as she smiled into the darkness.

Sansa dreamed of saying goodbye to Jon, of him standing in the Winterfell stables with that black handkerchief that she made for him. And then he was no longer the Jon that she remembered, he morphed into a younger version of her father, with only the handkerchief as a sure sign of his identity.

He was no longer in the stables, but out in the biggest courtyard with an army behind him and a snowstorm forming in the distance. The figures around them were mostly faceless, she could only make out a beautiful, petite young woman with hair almost as pale as snow, beside her was a man of extremely short stature that she recognised as being Tyrion Lannister, next to him was a tall figure in armour with a face that she couldn’t quite make out.

“Sansa, it’s time to go, the dead are coming.”

The dead are coming. The dead are coming. The dead are coming...

Arya

Sometimes it seemed like someone replaced her sister with some sort of body-snatching creature from one of Old Nan’s stories. Arya did not mind either way really, even if whoever replaced her sister was a disguised monster, it was clearly better than her sister.

As much as she would have liked for that theory to be true, she was forced to admit that her sister was still her sister. Sansa just changed, a lot, and the time it took for her to do that was too short to be accidental. Clearly, something must have happened to Sansa that no one was aware of which was surprising in itself as Sansa severely lacked secret keeping skills.

Whatever it was, Arya was set on uncovering it all sooner or later. Only she did not quite know how. She couldn’t just ask why she was suddenly so nice and helpful, a question like

that was bound to be answered with a witty retort that would close the conversation then and there.

All this time spent trying to fall asleep could be better used to devise a plan. It was now visibly lighter outside, yet Arya was no closer to figuring out how to get Sansa to open up to her about whatever made her behave so differently.

“The dead are coming.”

That startled Arya, she turned around swiftly, surprised to see that her sister was seemingly asleep.

“The dead are coming,” Sansa repeated. It was as if she was talking to Arya, her voice was so clear, but she wasn’t. Her sister was clearly dreaming up monsters of her own, which was strange since Sansa stopped having nightmares over childhood stories long ago. Arya gently shook her sister by the shoulder.

“Sansa, wake up, you are having a nightmare.” Arya grew more frightened and frustrated when there was no response. “Wake up, I said.” She shoved Sansa harder and her sister’s eyes abruptly opened, revealing a glassed over look of pure terror.

“What was it, Sansa? What did you see?”

“It was nothing, Arya, don’t worry. Did you hear me say anything?” Sansa looked at her pointedly.

“No, nothing coherent at least, you just looked really uncomfortable.” Sansa looked relieved at her lie.

It was clear that something was seriously wrong with her sister, and Arya Stark was prepared to play the long game to find out.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Jon and Sansa receive letters.

Chapter Notes

Please be aware that there is a somewhat significant time jump between the last chapter and this one.

I am sorry that I do not reply to all your comments individually, I've been very caught up with university stuff. But I do read them all and they totally make my day! Thank you so much for sticking with this story.

I am fairly nervous about this chapter!

Jon

Sam found him in the training yard of Castle Black, fresh after a sparring session with several men and boys of the Night's Watch.

“Jon, Maester Aemon wants to see you in the Library, there is a letter for you, from King's Landing.”

“Thank you, Sam.” As he walked past his friend and brother, Jon patted Sam on the shoulder before he let his hand drop back to his side. He headed straight for the vaults.

Jon was surprised at how quickly he was able to find his way around the underground stores of Castle Black. During his training period, he had gotten lost on several occasions. Jon knocked before he entered, but the near ancient Maester was too caught up in his own thoughts, his hand resting on a thick book that sat on the table, unopened.

“Maester Aemon, I believe you asked for me?” Said Jon softly. Maester Aemon slowly turned his head towards him.

“Yes, boy, there is a letter for you, from your Lord Father. You can sit and read it here in peace, no one will disturb you.” The old man's hands ghosted over the items spread out on the table, searching for the piece of folded parchment that arrived for Jon. The maester placed it on the corner for Jon to pick up. “Tell him the Watch thanks him for the raven.”

Jon nodded, not quite sure why the man would want to thank Jon's father for writing the letter. Soon, the maester left, assisted by one of his stewards and Jon was left alone with the words of a man who sent him here.

As soon as he cracked open the direwolf seal and read the first words, Jon knew something wasn't right about this letter.

Dearest Jon, it began.

Jon never had a letter from his father before this moment, but this is not how he supposed a letter from him would start. Out of all the things he could possibly call Jon, he hoped Eddard Stark would address him as 'son'.

I hope you are not too disappointed in the contents of this letter, for it is not written by my father. I promised to write, Jon, didn't I? Well, this is the first letter out of many, I hope.

The realisation dawned on him quickly, this letter was from Sansa. If he was being perfectly honest with himself, he didn't really expect her to write to him after all. Sure, they grew closer in the days before her departure. Still, why would she devote her time to her bastard half-brother who was leagues away in a frozen wasteland over her royal betrothed and all the wonders that King's Landing undoubtedly presented her with? If Jon learned anything new about Sansa Stark in the recent moons, it was that she had a knack for constantly defying his expectations.

I wasn't really familiar with the Night's Watch, but after a fairly long conversation with Father, I realised that they might not let you write to me. I don't imagine you have many ravens to be spared for what some would consider being frivolous communication. This is why the raven that delivered this letter is a gift to the Night's Watch.

You should have seen the surprise on Father's face when I asked for it! And he said that I could have asked for 'anything'. It's all because my engagement to Joffrey was broken, you see. I am not upset about it, of course, but he still thinks it is his fault that I was given false hope about the whole ordeal. That's where this present came from. I thought it would be best to make it seem as if he wrote the letter to make sure that it gets to you.

Jon could scarcely believe it, and he wasn't even sure what part was most unbelievable. The fact that Sansa wasn't saddened by the fact that she was no longer a future Queen of Westeros or the fact that out of all the things she could possibly ask for, Sansa asked for a means of communication with him. Maester Aemon's words now made much more sense. And what could possibly possess Joffrey to reject Jon's sister?

He still remembered the day of the welcoming feast at Winterfell, some parts of it at least. He remembered how radiant Sansa looked on Joffrey's arm as they entered the hall together. That image wasn't muddled by all the wine he consumed that night. Joffrey was clearly a fool, but perhaps it was all for the best.

You may be wondering how is it that I am no longer betrothed to Joffrey. At this moment I do not wish to burden you with the full explanation for it may worry you exceedingly, but someday when we meet again I'll tell you about it, it is quite the tale (and yes, Arya was

involved). In the end, he wasn't a prince from a song, far from it really. I am not to be betrothed to anyone else for some time, Father decided.

King's Landing is wonderful! I wish you could see it some day, too. I've never seen so many people in the same place in my life. Even more people will arrive shortly, for the tourney the King called in honour of the new Hand of the King. It is truly very exciting! The sun shines so brightly every day and I can soak in its warm rays in the rose gardens practically any time I want. Gods, I hope you don't mind this boasting about the weather, I believe it must be awfully cold there at the Wall.

He was curious as to what happened with Joffrey and Arya, it must have been something truly serious for it to result in such dire consequences for Sansa. For all her insistence on her indifference, Jon thought that her reluctance to tell him the whole story suggested that the memories were still raw and painful.

Jon did envy Sansa's current position still. Jon now thought that the Wall was his calling, but did he really want to leave Winterfell in the first place? If it was all up to him, he would have followed Eddard Stark South, to the lands where Eddard met Jon's mother. He wouldn't be here in this cold wasteland. But the Wall was the only place fit for a bastard like him, clearly, so that was the fate that he was going to accept. His sworn brothers will become his new family.

This brings me to the most important part of what I wanted to tell you, Jon. I did not want to begin with this matter for fear that you will burn it without reading another word. Have you taken your vows yet? If you have, I kindly ask you to burn the rest of this letter, but if you haven't - please read on.

Father informed me of the precise nature of service at the wall. I am sure you are aware of it too, Jon. I know you may feel like this is the only place in the world that will accept you as who you are, but that just isn't true. I know you may feel like you are a man grown, older than even Robb, and able to make your own decisions. But are you ready to give up love and family and freedom? If you take this road now, you can never go anywhere else, as the vows go, you will live and die at your post. But if you leave now to go somewhere else, the road that will lead you to Castle Black will not close, it will still be there for as long as you live. Jon, you are not a criminal sent to repent for their sins in a frozen wasteland, you do not owe anyone your service.

Before I met Joffrey, he sounded like everything that I have ever wanted but that impression was swiftly dissolved by my realisation of his true character. Betrothals are more easily broken than vows taken for life, Jon, so if you have even the slightest reservations about the Night's Watch, I beg you to reconsider. Return home, Robb is now Lord of Winterfell and I am sure he will be able to convince Mother to let you stay. If not, go convince some knight to let you squire for him and I am sure that soon I will see you placing a crown on a beautiful maiden's hair after you win a tourney. I believe you know that you have a rare talent with the sword, and the Wall isn't the only place where that talent can be of use. You should go wherever you want to go, find the greatest adventure that is truly your own. Please, Jon, think about what I said.

My thoughts are with you, always. Write soon and please pass on my best wishes to Uncle Benjen.

Yours,

Sansa Stark.

Jon stared intensely at the last paragraphs. It seemed like a cruel twist of fate, really, to receive this just after he has accepted his place here amongst the new recruits. He couldn't blame Sansa for it, of course. She was ignorant of what transpired here at the Wall and in Jon's head during the last fortnight. It was so like her to be hopeful about this world, but Jon knew better than to expect that Catelyn Stark would welcome him back.

On the other hand, Catelyn's world was consumed with helping Bran get better, but his little brother will never walk again and Catelyn could do nothing to change that. Perhaps now that Robb had a multitude of other duties, Jon could stay at Winterfell to care for his sick brother and to help him lead a life as close to normal as possible.

The letter also reawakens some of the anger for Eddard that Jon worked hard to suppress. Yes, the man told Sansa about the Night's Watch but he never bothered to tell Jon about how it would be here. It was a true place of winter - cold, savage and unforgiving. Filled with the lowest of the low. You could search this entire place for scraps of honour and only find it in a handful of men.

Perhaps this was a sign that he wasn't aware he was waiting for. Jon did not like the uncertain future that the Wall presented him with but if he left, only the Gods know what would happen then.

He wasn't ready to abandon this place, but suddenly he could see another possibility on the horizon.

Jon's thoughts drifted to Tyrion then, Jon hoped that the man was able to devise something that could help Bran, even if the possibility was quite remote. He also hoped that Robb would look past his prejudices to see Tyrion's true intentions in the matter.

Sansa asked him to think about the words she had written so that's what he was going to do. Jon carefully folded the letter and stuffed into his pocket.

There wasn't a better place to think about one's true place in the world than at the very top of the Wall. Perhaps today would be the day that would see the return of Benjen, riding towards the Wall from beyond the horizon.

Sansa

Sansa went to the rookery every day since she sent the letter to Jon, even though she knew that it would never arrive that quickly. A small part of her feared that she sent the letter too late and perhaps it was now all ash and smoke in some fireplace at Castle Black. But Sansa

Stark always had hope, so she waited to hear back patiently if that was what one could call checking up on it every day.

Acquiring the raven made Sansa feel slightly guilty because she felt like she was somewhat dishonest with her father when she overplayed her emotions over her failed betrothal. Still, it had gotten her what she wanted, and it probably didn't matter that much that she wasn't entirely honest since her intentions were pure.

Writing the letter itself was a painstakingly long ordeal that involved a lot of wasted paper. Firstly, it was the beginning of the letter. She could start with 'Dear Jon' but that let entirely too plain when she was writing a letter to someone who was practically her soulmate (even if he did not know that yet). She hoped that he would find her address to strange or inappropriate, but when she thought about it, it wasn't really unusual for letters between family members. She rewrote a dozen of first sentences, yet none of them seemed quite right.

Secondly, on about the fifteenth piece of paper, she managed to mistakenly write 'my father' instead of 'our father'. At that point, the piles of crumpled up parchment looked pitiful. She was sick of rewriting and the lack of progress, so she simply moved on hoping that Jon would not take notice of her peculiar word choice and a little dash next to the word 'my' that suggested that she almost crossed it out.

Surprisingly, the part that was the easiest to put down on paper was the one she dreaded the most. Sansa felt like she tried to convince Jon to leave the wall all in one breath that she held as she wrote down the words with a quiet determination. She hoped that her words got to him and that her letter will give him a better life just like Sansa's letter gave her a better life.

When the reply finally came, it was the only thing Sansa could think about. She went to read it straight after dinner in the privacy of her chambers.

Dear Sansa,

I am not gifted enough with words to adequately describe how touched I was by your letter. The Night's Watch isn't like anything I imagined it to be. It is as you said, full of murderers and other criminals sent here to answer for what they had done. I wish I could tell you more about it but there isn't much really beyond what you know, only it is worse.

As much as I would like to come back to Winterfell to live with Bran, Robb and Rickon, I do not wish to inconvenience your mother. She has gone through seven hells since Bran fell from that tower and I cannot further her suffering. As you suggested, I plan to pave the way to my own adventure.

I know that I promised to write to you during my time here, but it is with a heavy heart that I must admit that this will no longer be possible. Soon after I came to Castle Black, Uncle Benjen went to search for other members of the Watch that no one has seen since they left. Now, Uncle Benjen joined the ranks of men with unknown fates and locations.

In short, I have decided to leave the Night's Watch before taking my vows to journey north of the Wall in search of our uncle. Out of respect for our father, I have been given a horse and

some provisions to last a few days. Ghost is with me too. Even though they all think I have traded a lifetime of service for certain death, I hope that I will live to tell you all about it.

Jon Snow.

Her tears stained the worn out parchment as Sansa realized that in an attempt to save Jon's life she contributed to the absolute certainty of his death.

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