Disclaimer: I don't own HP, GOT, or ASOIAF. Would have finished the last two properly if I had.
Edited by Bub3loka

14th Day of the 3rd Moon, 303 AC

Jon Snow

Eyes closed, he focused on slipping his mind into the black-feathered bird on the desk before him.

“Fool, fool,” Mormont’s raven cawed at him, making Jon halt his attempts with a snort.

With a sigh, he stood up and tossed a few kernels of corn to the crotchety bird, who greedily began pecking at them.

Maybe he was a fool. With quite some effort, Jon could slip into the minds of other animals. He had the easiest time with horses and ravens, but it took nearly half an hour to succeed, regardless of his familiarity with the beast in question. Even Mormont’s raven, whom he had spent more than a year with, was not receptive to his attempts. No matter how he tried, forming a connection with other beings like Jon had with Ghost and the drakelings was impossible.

He could slip into their minds effortlessly and in an instant.

Without such a link, skinchanging was a slow, arduous process that seemed very taxing on the mind. The connection had to be reforged each time, the strain on his body and magic were hefty, but not too dire if used sparingly. Not only that, but unlike with his familiars, there was a certain range beyond which his connection would snap; when Jon had tried flying away more than fifteen miles with a raven, the link had broken, and his mind had returned to his body. Another enormous downside was that his body was completely unprotected while he slipped into another skin. In the end, skinchanging was an obscure and useless skill to put too much practice into, except for its use in scouting, and the fact that all the strain on his psyche had a mild bolstering effect on his mind.

It was only fitting; he was completely talentless in Legilimency, and that lack of aptitude seemed to have followed him in this life.

Mormont’s raven cawed at him, breaking him out of his musings. The old bird was loyal if nothing else; its big, beady black eyes were staring at him almost questioningly. For a short moment, he contemplated taking the raven with him.

No, it would be better to leave it here in Castle Black with Edd, giving some more legitimacy to his tenure as an interim Lord Commander.

A glance at the almost empty hourglass told him the time had come.

Jon grabbed Longclaw, fastened the scabbard to his belt, and made way for his former quarters, now Sansa’s chambers.

Brienne was dutifully guarding the door, and with a nod, the armoured woman went inside to fetch his sister.

A minute later, Sansa came out, her long, soft auburn locks woven in an intricate braid. Gone was the scared girl who wanted to flee. Not all was well; the past cruelties had left an invisible mark that might fade with time but never truly disappear. Still, Jon could see that the calm drudgery of Castle Black and his patient presence had been like a balm upon her weary heart—that and the hearty meals and a week of rest. Her blue eyes shone with steely resolve and, coupled with her tall stature, dark blue gown, and fur-lined cloak, made her look beautiful and almost imposing.

“Time for the war council, brother?” Her voice was even, composed, all traces of weakness safely hidden behind a mask of calm.

“Aye,” he said, “we’re to gather in a quarter hour or so.”

Jon led the way towards the meeting chamber while Brienne trailed a few steps behind.

“I’ve heard the oddest rumour.” Sansa eyed him curiously as they walked side by side down the stairwell.

“Oh?”

“Supposedly, you’ve been spending an hour or three in the smithy daily.”

“Not a rumour.” The confirmation stumped her for a heartbeat, and she lost her footing. But Jon immediately grabbed her before she could fall face-first down the stairwell. “You should be more careful.”

“Thank you, Jon.” There was a tinge of redness in her pale cheeks as he carefully released his hold on her. “I don’t think I’ve seen you show any interest in forging before.”

“It’s a new thing,” he admitted as they continued descending. “Nothing more than curiosity, in truth. But I can do only so much planning and training in a day, so a handful of hours in the smithy helps me clear my mind.”

Sansa nodded, accepting his explanation without any hesitation, even though that skill was considered a mainstay of lowborn servants and craftsmen. Despite being six and ten, barely a woman grown, his sister seemed to have matured greatly. Most noblewomen and men would look down upon such a craft that was clearly reserved for their *inferiors*.

Alas, his progress in smithing was indeed slow. He had much to learn, and without a skilled master to guide him, metalworking was nothing more than a whim. Trying to weave magic and metal together was oddly relaxing despite his lack of success. Even with his lack of skill and experience, there was a beauty to the art of enchanting and blacksmithing as the heated metal and the fire sang to him. Failure did not dampen his spirit—if Jon succeeded in this endeavour, his advantage on the battlefield would increase manifold.

His attempts at forging were not without progress; based on one of the treatises from the library, he had focused on working with bronze instead of steel the last sennight. Not only did bronze have a significantly lower melting point, but it was also more malleable and a far better conduit for magic. Even more so when adding powdered obsidian, although the two didn't mix well, Jon wanted to infuse the magic in the alloy, not the glass. While you could cold hammer your bronze into shape for a very good result, casting it worked, unlike with steel. While cast bronze was softer than forged bronze, it was far easier to shape and work with, and if he managed to make the enchantments hold, it would easily remove the downsides.

"Jon, do you think justice exists?" Sansa suddenly asked as they crossed through the yard, her tone completely casual, as if asking about the weather.

"Justice?" He barely managed to halt a dismissive laugh from escaping and scrutinised his sister. The question seemed innocent enough, but was anything but. Sansa was testing him. "Justice, fairness… are just words, no more true or false than the men who preach them. The strong do what they want, and the weak suffer what they must, sweet sister."

He could feel Brienne shuffle uncomfortably behind them, but the armoured woman remained silent.

"Then," his sister's voice was gravely quiet, "why are we fighting?"

Jon couldn't help but look at her carefully. She wasn't asking out of curiosity; no, it was out of a desire to peek into his thoughts. It wasn't that Sansa did not trust him, but she seemed to have a healthy feeling of caution and doubt. How often had she been let down or betrayed by those she deigned to trust?

"For family, for home, for peace, why else?" He flexed his fingers. "Win, and we'd be not only good but righteous; lose, and we'll be the villains, the vilest evil to walk the realm. In the end, history is written by the victors. If Lord Eddard Stark had lost the Rebellion, he would have been nothing more than another greedy fool for daring to raise arms against his rightful liege."

Sansa's gaze turned calculating for a heartbeat. A myriad of feelings passed through her face, grim understanding and trust being the strongest.

"Do you think… that even if Bolton is defeated, we can restore House Stark to its former glory?" she asked, her mask of calm cracking to reveal a hint of desperation beneath.

"It's going to be hard, Sansa," Jon admitted. "But we'll make it happen, one way or another. We'll retake our ancestral home, throw off the yoke of the grasping southern crown and its whims, and reforge our family's ancestral sword."

She nodded evenly again, and the impassive mask she had worn earlier returned to her face at what probably sounded like nearly impossible promises. Words were wind. Sansa seemed to have learned that bitter lesson along the way, so it was understandable that doubt would linger no matter what assurances he offered.

It didn't matter. When words failed, he would prove himself right through his deeds.

In a few silent minutes, they finally reached the shieldhall and its oaken door.

The dusty insides were as he remembered—long and drafty with blackened rafters covered by cobwebs. A few old cracked shields still decorated the walls, and the coat of arms depicting the origins of their owners had long peeled off. The rats were chased away by the mere presence of his familiars, who were crowded near the main hearth, illuminating the surroundings with their ruddy flame. Most of the tables were pulled over to the walls, with the biggest one, freshly wiped clean, positioned near the hearth.

Satin was lighting a few torches and hanging lanterns on the rafters above to illuminate the table for the meeting.

“Thank you, Satin; you can go along now,” Jon dismissed the former catamite.

He began arranging the pieces on the unfurled map of the North while Sansa sat in the oaken chair closest to the crackling hearth. “Why is Tormund the best representative of the wildlings?”

“The old bag of wind loves calling himself many things, but when Mance Rayder was trying to unify the wildlings under his banner, five other pretenders aimed to become Kings Beyond the Wall. Tormund, mead-king of Ruddy Hall, was one of them.”

“What happened to the others?”

Even Brienne leaned to listen, failing to cover up her interest.

“Mance Rayder killed three,” Jon recalled. “The fourth one, Styr of the Thenns, agreed to follow Rayder after being defeated thrice. Then I slew him in the battle for Castle Black. Tormund is respected and knows most of the other tribes and their chieftains and has either fought against them at some point or worked with them under Mance.”

The door creaked open again, rusty hinges groaning in protest, and Tormund, Davos, and Edd entered one after the other.

“Let us get to it, then,” the Onion Knight said as he joined them at the table, eyes gliding over the map.

“Tormund, have all the chieftains arrived?”

“Aye, Lord Crow. Or is it Lord Wolf now with your grey cloak?” The stout wildling ponderously tugged on his greying mane before letting out a hearty chuckle. “All of them are near Mole Town, gathered and ready to speak with you.”

“Lord Snow or just Jon will do. We’ll speak with the chieftains after we’re done here.” Jon hummed thoughtfully. “There should be shy of eight thousand spears ready to fight amongst the free folk. How willing do you feel they are to aid me?”

“Well, all who were allowed to pass the Wall owe you, Lord Snow.” Tormund scratched his nose with a frown. “But, the free folk hold little love for the crows and the southrons, n’ your demands of hostages

and tribute thinned some of the goodwill you earned. I have some clout and can get about four hundred warriors to follow you. Besides that, more than a third o' the rest ought to be willing to fight for you."

"Over twenty-five hundred fighters is a good start," Jon noted as he placed five figurines holding spears on the map near Mole Town. "Yet, Ramsay Snow has at least Hornwood, Dustin, Ryswell, and Karstark after the latter betrayed Stannis. That's nearly seven thousand swords, if not more."

Another fifteen figurines were placed around Winterfell under the Flayed Man banner.

"I wouldn't be so sure he has Hornwood's full support," Sansa hesitantly said. They all turned their gazes to her, making her shrink in his seat. She took a deep breath and schooled her face. "Back in Winterfell, I heard some rumours that there were some men causing trouble in the Hornwood lands because of Lady Donella's brutal death."

Jon rubbed his chin. "More trouble for Bolton suits us well, but it'd be hard to leverage it into an advantage we can use. Wars are ill-fought in winter for a reason, and the more time we give the Leech Lord, the more Houses he'll manage to consolidate under his rule. We have to strike now while the weather is still favourable, and some Northern bannermen still have some struggle and indecision left in them."

"Pardon me," Brienne interrupted cautiously, looking at him for permission to speak; he nodded. "Wouldn't it be better to wait for the dragons to grow? With the speed they're growing in half a year, they'll be a terrifying menace."

"So would be the cold up here," Edd muttered dully. "And the snow can get above forty feet in winter, easily killing any attempts at marching and fighting better than swords ever could."

"Dragons can stay hidden only so much, especially after they grow larger," Jon added, placing three crude draconic figurines next to Castle Black on the map. "The more we wait, the greater the chance that word of them slips away. That would only garner more attention and turn our foes to desperation. What's to stop them from resorting to assassins, poison and other underhanded methods to get rid of us before our threat grows? No, we need Winterfell before the winter snows come; the Watch and the free folk aren't ready to face the White Walkers with an enemy breathing down their necks either."

"Manderly, Reed, Locke, the Flints of Flint's Fingers and Widow's Watch will be too far to join us in time," Davos pondered out loud. "Even if they wanted to, they'd have to go through Bolton-controlled lands."

"Aye," Jon agreed with the smuggler's analysis. "That only leaves Glover, Mormont, Umber, and the mountain clansmen from the principal bannermen. The rest are minor lordlings and masters with barely a hundred swords each."

"Lord Umber is held hostage in the Twins," the onion knight coughed.

"So House Umber would either join Bolton or remain neutral. Let's assume the worst and consider them on Bolton's side. The Ironmen hold Deepwood Motte, so we cannot expect any help there either."

“If Umber joins Bolton, you’d have Last Hearth and its levies and garrison pointed like a dagger into your back.”

“Not a problem.” Jon shook his head. ”Both Stannis and Bolton squeezed the Umbers dry for men when the two Castellans decided to join the opposing sides. If Last Hearth had any left to send, they would have sent them when Mance attacked, but they simply had too few to spare. And now they’re even less.”

“What if we free the Glover’s seat from the reavers?” Sansa’s gaze focused on Deepwood Motte. “We can use it to rally the undecided Houses to our banner.”

“The detour is too big, and sieges can be bloody and slow,” he explained. “We cannot afford any delay on our way to Winterfell.”

“I beg your pardon for my crude words, but,” the Onion Knight hesitated for a handful of heartbeats, “why would the lords of the North agree to support either of you? Won’t they just see… a deserter bastard of the Night’s Watch who let the wildlings through and an unruly, unfaithful wife rebelling against her rightful husband?”

The words seemed to shake Sansa, and her mask finally cracked, doubt and hesitation heavy in her expression. Her eyes glistened, bitter tears threatening to spill from them. Jon squeezed her wrist reassuringly under the table, and with a mental nudge, Ghost stirred from the fireplace, trotted over and lay his enormous head into her lap. That seemed to calm his sister down, and a small yet heavy sigh tore out of Sansa’s mouth as she began to run a slender hand through Ghost’s shaggy fur.

“Perhaps they would, Ser Davos,” Jon said, his voice filled with dry amusement. “But that’s even better. True mettle and loyalty can only be tested in times of adversity.”

Tormund burped loudly. “Didn’t we give hostages to placate the kneelers? Would the southrons kill our sons if we fight against them?”

“Not if you march under the banner of House Stark and make no trouble on the way,” he quickly reassured. “Besides, marriages held at swordpoint are considered invalid in the eyes of the gods. Whatever names Sansa might have been forced to take, she is a trueborn Stark, born and bred in Winterfell. But Ser Davos is not wrong, and my presence would be frowned upon.”

Jon might be free of his vows, but so what? Who would believe him? Dead men did not rise again from their funeral pyre every day, and scars were flimsy proof at best.

“We could pen a letter to all the northern lords regardless, denouncing House Bolton for their treachery at the Red Wedding and the multitude of other betrayals they have committed,” his sister proposed, her voice harsh as she didn’t even try to hide her agitation. “Few were willing to support Stannis, but maybe some still hold loyalty towards the blood of House Stark. Jon and I should sign the letter so those with no qualms about my brother’s situation would aid us regardless.”

“Good, let’s call the banners,” he agreed. “If the lords along the southern coast raise arms, Bolton would be forced to keep some of his host back to deal with them anyway. Write a draft, and we’ll review it before sending it off.”

“Robb Stark dragged his bannermen into an aimless war with the other Kingdoms, and the most loyal died with him in the Red Wedding,” Ser Davos cautioned. “If it doesn’t seem like you two can win, even fewer will join you in this fight. I know men—they’re the same in every corner of the world. Why fight against overwhelming odds, risking retribution both upon oneself and family? For a House considered not only attainted but defeated and defunct?”

Sansa opened her mouth to retort but paused, and then her shoulders sagged in defeat. Davos was right, after all. Technically, neither Jon nor Sansa had the lawful right to call upon the Stark banners or claim Winterfell. The Flayed Man conquered the ancestral seat of their House, albeit with deception, and their rule was legitimised by victory, marriage, and support of the Iron Throne.

But did Jon care about technicalities?

Laws, decrees, and claims could be unmade as easily as they were made if your fists were big enough. Regardless of the world, the era, or what lies people told to make themselves feel better, might made right.

Westeros was a martial society; one victory and the Boltons would become traitors and usurpers, while many would flock to the direwolf banner.

“It matters not.” Jon exhaled slowly. “A smaller host moves swifter, feeds easier, and needs not bleed the land so heavily for forage. If we had swords enough to make the Bastard of Bolton feel threatened, he’d crawl behind Winterfell’s walls and wait for snow and hunger to do his killing. But if he sees us outnumbered two to one or more, he may grow bold, eager to prove his strength before his new-made bannermen, and take the field.”

Jon didn’t want Bolton to hide. As things were right now, the dragons were not grown enough to pose a real threat to castles. Their scales were still thin, vulnerable to arrows and would remain so for years.

Besides, in the months it would take the army to reach Winterfell, Jon would have retrained his magic capabilities enough to have another ace under his sleeve. With the bitter experience of his last life, he was *very* confident in his ability to kill people. One way or another, he’d figure something out. If victory on the battlefield looked impossible, he could always resort to assassination, no matter how risky it was to him.

“Few have won when outnumbered more than two to one.” Sansa’s voice grew thick with worry. “Can we do it?”

“The outcome of a battle is only decided after swords and spears clash, and no earlier. But regardless, we shall do everything we can to tilt the odds in our favour.” Jon cracked his knuckles. “Numbers are important, but far from everything. Don’t forget the dragons—they are not to be underestimated. It will be hard for men to hold a battle line when fire rains from above.”

Hopefully, they’d be big enough to make a difference by then.

His sister shuffled uneasily and looked at him, as if trying to read his mind. “I thought you had to ride dragons to command them into battle?”

She was correct; Jon had forgotten that Sansa was well-versed in heraldry, history, and lore, not only the womanly arts.

He paused for a moment before deciding to reveal just some of his *skills*. After all, that particular skill would come out sooner or later. “Fret not—ever since the resurrection, I can feel Ghost and the drakelings in my mind, so commanding them will be no issue. Try not to speak of this outside of this hall, though.”

With a sigh, Jon tugged on the connections in his mind, and in a heartbeat, Ghost and the drakelings stirred from beside the fireplace and lazily arranged themselves in a line behind him. Another tug, and they grew still like statues.

“Hah! Sixskins, that vicious runt, always said you were a skinchanger!” Tormund chortled while the rest sized up Jon with wary looks. “But even he couldn’t do a trick like this, har!”

As expected, the reveal of his abilities was met with disbelief and suspicion. Yet Jon wasn’t really surprised; many feared the unknown and envied the gifted. This was one of the reasons he had decided to keep his magic close to his chest.

“It was easier than I thought.” Jon shrugged impassively, gauging the reactions across the table. “If there’s nothing more, let’s meet with the chieftains now.”

The walk to Mole’s Town would be as silent as the grave if not for the hatchlings’ enthusiastic screeching as they flew in circles above them. His human companions, however, were deep in contemplation, Sansa throwing him errant yet curious glances as if studying some unknown stranger. Jon had expected such a reaction from his sister, but receiving it in person was no less discomforting.

The village was still abandoned; none of the inhabitants had returned since the Battle of Castle Black, and the free folk had taken their place instead. The snow outside had mostly melted, leaving only patches of white behind rocks where the sun couldn’t reach. The weather was pleasant, and the sky was clear—auspicious signs of fortune.

Tents were strewn around the handful of hovels, and plenty of free folk curiously gazed at their group. Ghost and the drakelings attracted quite a lot of attention, but not as much as he and Sansa; children were pointing at them, whispering ‘*Firewalkers’*.

Yet, none truly dared to approach or bar their path.

Weaving through the tents, Tormund finally led them into a large clearing with a sizeable bonfire in the middle, where Jon could recognise the chieftains and famed raiders who agreed to pass the Wall on his terms. Sons as hostages, all of their meagre wealth, and vows to fight for the Watch when the time came.

It was a motley gathering; they wore mismatched leather, hides, and furs in many colours. Some were short and stout, almost a whole head shorter than Jon; a scant few were plump, and there were plenty of those tall and burly, including Wun Wun, who towered twice over even the tallest of them.

Here and there, the clinking of ringmail pilfered from dead rangers could be heard, and a few chipped swords and axes rested upon their crude belts. Yet, the vast majority were armed with bone, wooden cudgels, and stone-tipped spears, and a few bronze spears and swords were probably traded or stolen from the Thenns.

The Great Walrus, one of the more powerful chieftains from the Frozen Shore, clad in bear pelts lined with pale tusks around the shoulders and forearms, stepped forward and patted his enormous gut, bulging from his cloak. “Lord Snow, ye want us ya fight this flayed man in the South?”

“Aye.”

The wizened Dim Dalba, clad in a coarse brown leather shirt with a heavy, fur-lined cloak draped over his gaunt shoulders, hummed and gazed thoughtfully at him with his dull, brown eyes. “And why would we?”

Everyone quieted down as Jon gathered his thoughts for a few heartbeats.

“House Bolton is not one for mercy or kindness. If given enough time, they can turn the whole North against the free folk and the Watch.” His voice was deathly calm and quiet, drawing everyone in to listen. “I have no intention of staying and waiting for Bolton to prepare and come here in force. The Flayed Man has taken my home, savaged my sister, and slain my brother. No, this battle shall be on my terms—I shall head to Winterfell and break House Bolton and all the lords that oppose me!”

The clearing erupted in shouts and hollers and cheers.

It took over half a minute for the commotion to die down, and Dim Dalba shook his head. “This is not what we agreed to, Jon Snow. We shall fight with the Cold Shadows as promised when the time comes, but this flayed man is not our foe!”

Many chieftains hesitated at those words, a few older ones nodding in agreement. To his side, Sansa’s face paled even further.

“Our agreement remains unchanged,” Jon agreed, unaffected by the sharp words. All of this was already within his expectations. “But I’ve said my piece. I shall go down South to fight regardless, and I do not need cravens and weaklings too afraid to fight. Who stands with me?!”

Many hesitated even at his bellow, but then the burly Soren Shieldbreaker, leader of a large warband with a shaggy mane of chestnut hair atop his head, stepped forward daringly and raised his jagged axe in the air.

“Soren’s axe is yours, Lord Snow!”

His cry seemed to have awoken the rest of them.

“Aye, I’ll fight fer ya, Lord Wolf!” the gaunt Blind Doss roared and thrust his spear at the cloudy sky.

Howd the Wanderer, a stocky man with a long, tangled beard who led three scores of hunters, also stirred. “You could have let us all perish under the cold blades of the Walkers, yet you let us pass the Wall. You have my sword!”

“I never ran from a fight,” another, thickset man grunted out.

The hollers and battle cries seemed to have roused the fighting spirit of the free folk, and Sigorn of the Thenn, Wun Wun, the Harle Brothers, and a few more were quick to raise their arms towards the heavens and declare support…

14th Day of the 3rd Moon, 303 AC

The Queen Regent, The Red Keep

She studied her reflection in the mirror of polished silver and hated what she saw. Her brows had almost regrown completely, and pale stubble clung to her scalp where her golden hair had once flowed like a lion’s mane. Now she looked a beggar queen, some ragged crone in a mummer’s play, and the sight of it set her teeth to grinding.

Oh, her lovely, shining hair…

Cersei tore her gaze away, snatched the goblet of Arbour gold from the carved mahogany table, and took a deep swallow. The wine was sweet with a sour bite, and the burn in her throat was one of the few solaces left to her….

“Qyburn is here, Your Grace,” came Trant’s muffled voice beyond the door.

“Send him in.”

The tall, greying scholar shuffled through the doorway, his steps as silent as always. The deferential expression on his face pleased her greatly, almost as much as his acquisition of Ser Robert Strong, who still stood quietly in the corner. The Bloody Maester, they called him. He had shrugged off those frayed rags for his fine white robes, golden whorls, and a gilded sash that finally made him look like a proper servant of the crown.

But he was leal, and Cersei had found that truly leal men were rarest in these treacherous times.

“Any leads on my uncle’s murder? Was it my misshapen brother or perhaps the Tyrells?”

“I’m afraid neither, Your Grace, ” Qyburn murmured. He bowed low, avoiding her gaze.

She narrowed her eyes, and the silence thickened. Another swallow of wine calmed her fury. “If not them, who?”

Who would be conspiring against her son now? Another would-be usurper or a new self-styled king?!

“I have found… traces…” Qyburn said at last. “Traces that suggest Varys’ little birds have wandered through the hidden passages. Along with a set of a grown man’s footsteps in the dust, leading to the room where Ser Kevan was killed.”

“That excludes neither the Tyrells nor my kinslaying brother!”

“I believe Varys slew Pycelle and your uncle.” Qyburn didn’t flinch under her gaze. “The tunnels beneath the Keep are known to a select few, and Varys was the only one to master them all.”

“But why now?” Cersei shuffled uneasily. “Why would a cockless man come back here to slay those who have not done him ill?”

“Few act without a reason, but his return coincides with the appearance of the self-proclaimed dragon…”

Could it be? Could the accursed eunuch have played them all? She raised her goblet, but it was now empty, much to her displeasure.

Absentmindedly, the Queen signalled Dorcas to refill her cup with wine. Her chief handmaid was plump but skilful in her service, albeit slow of wit, and quickly brought over the jug of golden wine. A few heartbeats later, the sweet vintage was again pleasurably twirling around Cersei’s tongue.

None had thought the Spider was ever loyal, even her dullard of a husband, and Varys always proved himself useful enough not to be dismissed. Yet now that the words had left Qyburn’s mouth, it all made so much sense—the thrice-damned Spider had played them all in his mummer’s farce!

And not only that, but it seemed the eunuch had indeed backed this self-styled dragon king of his.

“Any news of Lord Tyrell and his daughter?”

“They have surely perished in the wildfire,” Qyburn replied, face almost regretful. Almost. “I’m afraid none have survived the fires past the walls of Maegor’s holdfast.”

Joy rushed through her chest, and Cersei laughed. It came out unbidden, escaping her mouth as the sound echoed across the chambers. All those vile, unwashed street rats that leered and jeered at her shame were now gone. All turned to ash, along with the thorny roses, the High Sparrow, and his zealous ilk!

No less than any of them deserved!

Almost all of her foes ended in one fell swoop; if Cersei believed the gods cared, she would claim it was divine punishment from the Stranger himself.

The wretches had died a wretches’ death. Only the mad reaver and that false dragon were now left daring to oppose her sweet son, but they would also fall, just like the Young Wolf and Robert’s brothers.

With an inward sigh, Cersei returned her attention to the waiting Qyburn. “Has the wind finally dispelled that dreadful green smoke?”

The wildfire burned for three days and showed no signs of letting up, its smoke quickly choking anyone who dared breathe it. Under Qyburn’s advice, Cersei ordered that all the shutters and windows in Maegor’s Holdfast be barred and had the arrow slits plugged with curtains and leather.

That had kept Cersei from reuniting with her dear friend Taena, whose companionship had been sorely missed.

“The fires have finally begun to die out, yet a green smog lingers in the air.” For once, a hint of worry appeared on Qyburn’s leathery face. This was the first time the Queen had seen the Bloody Maester anxious, and she couldn’t help but feel a tinge of concern.

“Does the wind and the rain not disperse this jade mist?”

“Nay, and it is no less deadly than the smoke.” The weary words made her insides chill. “I believe everyone outside of Maegor’s Holdfast is dead.”

What about the rest of the court residing within the other parts of the Red Keep?!

“How? Would the fools not close their shutters?”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” the man said remorsefully. “There is vile, cursed power swirling with the mist now. Even if they did, they lack the protections this holdfast has.”

“What do you mean, Qyburn? Speak plainly!”

The man carefully leaned closer.

“Maegor has woven his blood magicks into the walls of this castle.” The words were so quiet that she could barely make them out. “It is faint—I only sensed them once the wildfire started raging. And they’re growing fainter still. This city has become cursed, forever haunted by the pyromancer’s reckless folly mingled with the vengeful ghosts of half a million tortured souls.”

Cersei took another generous gulp of wine. Oh, her poor Taena. Now, the Queen was alone and friendless, with just her son.

But if what Qyburn had said was true, they were in danger here.

She was unwilling; leaving King’s Landing sounded like a defeat. But the Bloody Maester had never lied, not truly. Even now, a glance at the old man’s face told her the truth; he was afraid, even though his expression tried to hide it, his fingers were quivering.

The decision came in an instant.

No, Cersei would not stay here and risk the life of her sweetling son. She took a generous swallow of wine again, soothing her frayed nerves. “We must leave, then. But how?”

Relief bloomed on Qyburn’s face, and he bobbed his head. “I have just the thing, Your Grace—a hidden passage that leads beyond the city’s walls. If we hurry, we can make it out in time!”

In the end, it was no true loss. King’s Landing was barely better than an enormous pigsty, the smallfolk here vile and unwashed, with the court full of lying traitors and foolish sycophants. On the other hand, Casterly Rock and the clean streets of Lannisport would make for a royal seat worthy of her son!

15th Day of the 3rd Moon, 303 AC

Sansa Stark

They were to march in two days’ time, heading for the lake near Queenscrown where the wildling host would muster in full before turning their spears toward Winterfell.

By Jon’s count, they had gathered nearly three thousand warriors. Many chieftains were lukewarm, refusing to offer any aid, while others offered only a part of their strength, leaving warriors behind to defend the women and the children.

Still, it was more than she had dared hope.

Bolton had more men, better armed and better trained, but Jon carried himself with an ironclad conviction, as if defeat had not even entered his mind. It was not arrogance or pride, not truly—Sansa had seen plenty of both down in King’s Landing, and her brother did not posture around for the sake of it or out of some sense of stubbornness. No, he wholeheartedly believed that he could achieve victory.

It was contagious in a way; his confidence saw the wildlings look eager for the fight, their morale soaring. Even she had found her worries lessen, if just slightly, for the doubts in her mind were not so easily dispelled.

Sure, Bloodfyre and Stormstrider approached the sizes of large wolfhounds, and Winter was already as tall as a young colt. But they no longer doubled in size every three days.

While formidable looking, Sansa couldn’t help but doubt if the dragons could have any impact on the battlefield. Even Stormcloud, Aegon the Younger’s dragon, was downed by arrows and scorpion bolts despite nearing ten years of age.

Was it confidence in himself? Sansa would be the first to admit that Jon Snow was no longer that young, lithe boy in Winterfell but a man grown. Her brother was a dangerous warrior now, and she had seen Jon easily fend off multiple opponents at once. Yet, there was only so much a single swordsman could do on a battlefield, no matter how skilled or strong. Even the legendary Barristan Selmy had not turned the tide of the Battle of the Trident.

'Where did this conviction come from?' Sansa wondered.

Did Jon have faith in the Stark Bannermen to answer their call? But she harboured little hope that such an outcome could be achieved—most Northern lords had been at her wedding with Ramsay, smiling, feasting, and happily talking with Roose Bolton.

Was it the dragons that gave him this confidence? But even dragons took time to grow, nearly a decade before they could be used in battle, according to the Dance. And the younger dragons were vulnerable, easy to kill.

In the end, Sansa could only sigh and follow—she knew very little about war, fighting, and killing. She wanted to believe, but… the world was a brutal, harsh place, not a fairytale. A cruel lesson that left its mark upon her flesh, with blood and pain.

With a grimace, she warily looked around the shieldhall. The long, drafty insides of the building were now illuminated by five hearths, all roaring alive with flame and filling the air with the ruddy scent of burning oak.

The long dining table was laden with food: meat, porridge, onions, and fish that had just arrived from Eastwatch in barrels, preserved with snow and ice. It paled in comparison to the royal feasts that Sansa had tasted in the Red Keep or even to what was served at the family dinners in Winterfell, but it was still rather plentiful.

Jon sat at the head of the table, with Tormund to his right, in the traditional position of the most trusted. He was followed by Eddison Tollett, a dour yet trusty black brother, and the rest of the chieftains. Sansa sat to Jon's left, where the highest-ranking lady, usually the lord's wife, sat, followed by Brienne, Val, and some lesser warband leaders and spearwives.

The atmosphere was… far rowdier than she expected. Everyone devoured the food as if famished without any care for propriety or cutlery, and ribald jokes and rowdy hollers echoed through the dark stone walls.

"I fucked a giant once," Tormund was explaining to the stone-faced Brienne as he gobbled up chicken, his meaty hands covered with oil. "They call me giantsbane for a good reason—"

It would be scandalous for noblemen and women to do so in the open, but she found it oddly calming to her frizzled nerves. It might have been boisterous, but the lack of thinly veiled insults, hidden barbs, fake smiles, and double meanings was oddly… refreshing in a way.

It lacked courtly grace, but it was more real than anything she had seen in the Red Keep.

Something brushed slightly against her foot from her right, and Sansa whipped her head towards Jon.

"Don't forget to eat." He pushed a crude bronze plate filled with onion, leek, and mutton to her.

"Thank you." Sansa nodded primly and slowly began to fork at the dish.

It was bland, just like everything else at the Wall. No longer tired and hungry as before, she couldn't help but judge the food.

Salt, spice, and herbs were rare here. Less so than in most villages and cities for the poor smallfolk, according to Ser Davos and Dolorous Edd. What Sansa frowned upon eating, many considered the highest of luxury. She liked it little but remained silent and forced it down her throat instead; this was the best Castle Black could offer, and everyone else ate… worse.

Her silent musings were interrupted by the entrance of a hurried watchman. Like the rest of his order, he looked tired and shabby—even his cloak was frayed around the edges, and his brown hair was streaked with grey.

The weary man quickly ran over the head of the table and fished out a sealed scroll from his belt.

"A letter for you, Lord Commander," he said. The words were hoarse and ragged, just like the rest of him.

"I am not Lord Commander anymore, Dalyn."

Jon took the letter regardless. The scroll was sealed with pink wax and bore the sigil of… the Flayed Man. Dread filled her gut at seeing the coat of arms of House Bolton, and any remaining vestiges of appetite fled her.

The man turned to leave, but Jon was already skimming the letter and asked, "How did this letter get here?"

"From a rider by the gate, Lord… Snow." The words were uncertain, though Sansa couldn't tell if it was because of the title or the rider in question. They all still treated her brother as their lord and commander.

Jon had already closed his eyes, his face focused.

"Can," her voice cracked from the tension, "can I have the letter?"

Without looking up, Jon pushed the parchment to her. "Here, you can read it out loud for the rest."

With trepidation, Sansa accepted the offered roll of parchment and tried her best to prevent her hands from shaking.

"*To the traitor and bastard Jon Snow,*

You allowed thousands of wildlings past the Wall. You have betrayed your own kind, and you have betrayed the North. Winterfell is mine, bastard. Come and see; your brother Rickon is in my dungeon."

Her voice wavered, and her insides twisted into an icy knot. Sansa took a moment to steel herself and continued reading. She would not be intimidated by Ramsay. No, not anymore!

"*His direwolf skin is on my floor. Come and see.*

I want my bride back. Send her to me, and I will not trouble you or your wildling lovers. Keep her from me, and I will slaughter every wildling man, woman, and babe under your protection. You will watch as I skin them living, and you will watch as my soldiers take turns raping your sister. You will watch as my dogs eat your little brother. Then, I will spoon your eyes from their sockets and let my dogs do the rest.

Come and see.

-Ramsay Bolton, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North"

The last words were uttered with confusion and dread.

Before they could fully sink in, Sigorn Thenn slammed his tankard onto the table.

"I will drink from his skull!"

The hall erupted in a cacophony of jeers, hollering, and insults. It took Sansa a few moments for her stunned mind to process the scene in front of her—half looked to be angered, but the rest of the wildlings were just laughing in amusement, as the letter had been a ludicrous jest, not an open threat.

How did the Boltons know she was here?

Terror once again filled Sansa, but for a completely different reason. What sick game was Ramsay playing this time?

Yet, at that moment, the hall door was slammed open again with a bang.

An enormous white direwolf slipped in, dragging in a wailing figure. Ghost had his jaws around the man's ankle and effortlessly pulled the man in like a child's doll. The cries and moans of anguish and pain quickly drowned the clamour in the hall.

"Let's see what we can get from Bolton's envoy." Jon's voice was as cold as ice as he stood up, and all the wildlings watched with rapt attention.

Her brother swiftly walked towards the terrified figure writhing on the ground, and Ghost reluctantly released the ankle of his victim. With a single, effortless motion, Jon picked the man by the scruff and lifted him as if he were a newborn kitten with a single hand.

"Please, m'lord, let me go. I didn't do nothin'!'" The man started struggling and babbling, but it was to no avail. "I'm an envoy—an envoy!"

The man was struggling in vain—Jon's grip was iron-tight.

"And you think such a paltry excuse is enough for you to escape when you came here to deliver a threat?" Her brother's voice was emotionless. "What is your name?"

"Jaron, m'lord. Please—"

“I shall ask you some questions, and you *will* speak truthfully. Lie, and I will let my friend Ghost,” he petted the giant direwolf with his free hand, “take a bite out of you.”

Ghost obediently opened his maw, showing a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth. Jaron's face froze in terror, and he quickly bobbed his head like a squirrel.

“The letter you bore has some interesting *claims*,” Jon mused darkly. “How could Ramsay Snow have my brother Rickon or his direwolf when they perished nearly two years ago at the hands of the Ironmen?”

“Er… Hother Umber brought a young boy with a big black wolf just like yours as a present to Lord Bolton, m'lord,” the messenger hurriedly replied. “Claimed it’s Rickon Stark.”

“Describe the boy for me.”

“T-The lad was not older than nine name d-days. With bright b-blue eyes, auburn hair and half-wild, m'lord.”

The words were few, but aptly described Rickon. There had been only six direwolves south of the Wall, and a single one had a raven black coat of fur…

Jon had also grown quiet, seemingly satisfied with the response. Yet, much to Sansa’s amazement, the messenger still dangled helplessly in the air, as her brother did not release his grip even while lost in thought.

Yet an important detail did not leave her mind—Ramsay had signed the letter as Lord of Winterfell. Sansa stood up and took a few curious steps forward. “What happened to Roose Bolton?”

Jaron froze at her question and began visibly sweating. A quiet snarl from Ghost, and the messenger gulped.

“Ah...Ramsay...he st-stabbed h-his father to d-d-death. And Lady Walda and h-her newborn son g-got fed to t-t-the h-h-hounds.”

“Kinslayer!” Davos was the one to spit on the ground, many a mouth echoing the sentiment through the hall just as loudly. The wildlings might have been savage and unruly folk, but even they respected the old gods and held to the sacred customs…

Sansa knew Ramsay could do terrible things, but kinslaying like this outside a battle was *unthinkable*. Yet deep inside, she wasn't too surprised.

This only revealed how monstrous her husband was, a vile beast trapped in the skin of a man.

Her gaze settled on Jon’s face. His eyes looked like two smouldering pools. He raised his free hand in a fist, and the commotion instantly died out. “Which Houses were in Winterfell supporting Ramsay aside from the Umbers?”

“D-Dustin, R-Ryswell and K-K-Karstark, m'lord.” The messenger could barely speak at this point. He had even shat himself, judging by the acrid smell of privy that rankled her nose.

Sansa wasn't sure if he was more terrified by Ramsay or Ghost. Or maybe Jon. But Jon was kind and gentle… at least to her.

Her brother, however, seemed completely unperturbed, aside from the slight twitch of his nose.

“Ghost can smell liars. And you, good man, you have not lied once.” Jon hummed as he inspected the man he held in the air. “What should I do with you, I wonder?”

“M-Mercy, m'lord, mercy! You said you'd let me go. I have done no wrong.” Jaron began to flail pathetically with his arms. Her brother only lifted him higher, unbothered by the resistance. “I’m j-just an e-envoy!”

“True, you have done nothing wrong. Yet,” her brother rubbed his stubble, face growing thoughtful, “I never said anything about letting you go, did I? You’re not even a proper envoy, just a messenger, come to send the message and leave like a knave in the dark. My promise was to feed you to Ghost if you lied…”

The words hung ominously in the air. Sansa could not read Jon’s imposing figure at this moment, and it felt like he was contemplating simply disposing of the messenger who had done no wrong.

Where was her kind yet sullen brother?

Your father is a killer. Your brother is a killer. The world is built by killers…

The Hound’s raspy laughter echoed in her mind. House Stark was not brought down with honour, fairness, and justice. Why would she care for such when her foes did not?!

The bored voice of Dolorous Edd cut through the tension. “Jon, we can always use more men at the Night's Watch.”

Jaron began to nod frantically. “Y-Yes, m'lord, p-please, I will j-join, take the black!”

“Indeed, it is a noble calling.” Her brother shrugged his shoulders carelessly and finally dropped the messenger, who crumpled on the ground like a bag of turnips. “He's all yours, Edd.”

Jon nodded to everyone and rushed out of the hall, followed by Ghost.

Sansa could feel something was wrong. No, many things were wrong. After a brief moment of hesitation, she quickly followed after her brother, abandoning her bland meal. A few minutes later, she finally arrived in Jon’s quarters, finding him quickly packing clothes and supplies as if he were getting ready to travel.

“Jon?” Her voice was breathless and jagged like a cracked piece of glass. “Are you going somewhere?”

“I’ll try to save Rickon.” Her brother did not pause his preparations and deftly continued packing a travel bag. “If he still lives.”

Sansa blinked a few times, wondering if her ears were betraying her. But no, she was not hearing things and the sight before her was undeniable.

“You want to save Rickon alone?”

“Aye,” he answered without an ounce of hesitation. “If I ride hard, I can try and get to Winterfell in less than ten days.”

Her heart began to thunder with worry like a war drum, and a deep, shuddering breath escaped her lips.

Not like this.

She couldn’t lose her last brother…

“This…” The words were heavy on her tongue. Did Jon not see? Ramsay was just playing with them; Rickon was already dead. “This is a trap, Jon. Please, please, don’t go! *Please!*”

Her vision began to swim. Her chest constricted, her breathing became hard, and the world around her spun.

Yet no collision with the floor came; a familiar pair of strong hands gently lifted her, and she was placed somewhere soft.

Jon’s bed.

“I’m here. Breathe in and breathe out slowly, Sansa.” Her brother’s silky voice was impossibly soothing as his fingers carefully brushed away her tears. The feeling of suffocation disappeared, and Sansa calmed down as she followed his words.

His fingers ran through her soft, auburn curls as he whispered comfortingly and cooed at her as if she were a scared little girl.

But it *worked*.

The feeling of worry and helplessness receded. Sansa closed her eyes, basked in the attention and care, and wished this moment never ended. It was so nice, so soothing, and she melted into the covers. Yet the world was cruel, she knew. Despite Jon’s kindness, he was stubborn as a mule when his mind was made up.

Forlornly, she opened her eyes, and deep blue met dark amethyst. No, begging and pleading would not move Jon; it was time to try logic and reason.

“I know… *Ramsay*,” she spat, the name was like a thorn upon her tongue. “All he wants to do is trick you into playing his mad games. Rickon is as good as death, and I have no wish to lose my last brother for some pittance of hope and deceit.”

Jon seemed weary at this moment, and a heavy, heart-rending sigh rolled off him.

“I know,” he said, voice raw with resignation and… was that fury? “I know the Bolton bastard is trying to goad me into a trap. Yet… I would not be able to forgive myself if I didn’t try to save Rickon. Hope is insidious like that.”

Sansa wanted to cry again; she was so unwilling.

Why couldn’t Jon just stay with her?

“Can’t you just… warg from here? Or send someone else to do it. Anyone!” Her voice cracked. “It’s too dangerous, I can’t lose you too…”

“Alas, my control of beasts cannot reach that far. And sending a beast or someone else would be folly—they don’t know Winterfell and the surroundings half as well as I do.” Jon closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. “I just can’t leave Rickon to the Flayed Man, Sansa. Fret not—Winter, Stormstrider, and Ghost shall be with me.”

To her great reluctance, Jon finally removed his hand from her hair, stood up and continued packing. Her heart clenched painfully, and Sansa cursed the gods inwardly. She cursed everyone and everything, but Ramsay received the most of her ire.

But wait, he only mentioned two of the drakelings…

“W-What about Bloodfyre? How am I to lead all the wildlings without you, Jon?! I know nothing of war…”

“I shall speak to the chieftains. Tormund shall aid you with wrangling the rest of them. And Bloodfyre shall stay to protect you in my stead.”

“But I cannot command dragons like you can, Jon!”

“You won’t need to,” he said, chuckling. “Bloodfyre is smart enough to understand the common tongue and shall follow your every word.”

That… was not how dragons worked! But Sansa found no words could leave her lips in the face of Jon’s unyielding conviction. At this moment, it felt like trying to wrangle with Arya again, overly stubborn and unmoved once her mind was made up.

A shuddering sigh rolled out of her lips. Her heart grew heavy with shame and embarrassment for writing Rickon off for dead. She had given up so quickly on him, while Jon had not.

Her throat felt dry like the sands of Dorne at this moment, but she desperately forced herself to speak. “Just promise me, Jon. Promise me that you will come back to me. I don’t want to lose you too…”

“I promise, Sansa.” Jon inclined his head and threw his travel bag over his shoulder. “I shall be departing at once. Every second matters for our brother.”

And just like that, he left through the door. Jon was gone, leaving Sansa Stark alone in his bed, feeling downcast and resigned.