

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Jon and Benjen reach Winterfell~

-x-X-x-

“JON!”

They're greeted at the gates of Winterfell, not by Jon's father, nor by the castle steward, but by Arya Stark in a dress, her eyes bright and her smile blinding as she hurries over the moment they ride in on horseback.

Jon doesn't know how she found out they were coming, nor how she knew they'd arrived, but it doesn't surprise him that she'd snuck away to come and see them. Chuckling, he just barely manages to get his footing coming down from his horse before his younger sister slams into his chest, hugging him as tightly as she possibly can.

“It's good to see you too, Arya.”

He hugs her back, but by the time the embrace probably should have ended, Arya is still clinging to him for dear life, causing Jon to blink and pat her back a bit awkwardly. Finally, she pulls back just enough to look up at him.

“You have to save me from her, Jon. She's been absolutely awful since coming back from King's Landing. I'll take the black if I have to, just get me away from her!”

Jon's smile drops, replaced by a frown. Arya doesn't have to elaborate on just who she's talking about. There's only one woman that fits the

description... Lady Catelyn Stark. And frankly, Jon can understand precisely why Arya is so upset too.

For a few short months there, Lady Stark was down in King's Landing, supervising and chaperoning Sansa while his half-sister and the King decided whether they were right for each other or not. But that was all over now, with Sansa having married the King and been named the Queen. Or rather, she'd been named A Queen. Apparently she shared the title with Princess Arianne of Dorne, which honestly sounded... greedy to Jon.

It wasn't his place to judge though. In the end he'd sent Sansa a letter with his concerns and received a response in which she'd made it clear just how happy she was. Apparently, she and this Dornish Princess were even best friends, strange as it seemed to him.

Either way, as far as Arya was concerned, the biggest thing to come out of that marriage was that Lady Stark finally came back to Winterfell. Back to Arya, who had just gotten used to not having her mother breathing down her neck at every turn and siding with her Septa on every single issue that cropped up.

So yes, Jon could imagine Arya was suffering. Unfortunately, Benjen puts it best as he comes around from the other horse and reaches out to ruffle his niece's hair.

"Hah! Not on your life, sweetheart! The Watch is no place for a woman, I'm afraid."

Arya pouts mightily, shooting Jon an imploring look like somehow HE was going to be able to countermand Benjen's words. Rolling his eyes, Jon offers his sister a smile and a shake of his head.

“The First Ranger is right, Arya. Sorry.”

That causes Arya’s face to fall in disappointment and Jon immediately opens his mouth to try and offer something else to make her feel better. Unfortunately, before he can make any promises of spending time with her later, they’re interrupted.

“Benjen, Jon.”

Both Benjen and Jon straighten up at the sound of Eddard Stark’s voice. Even if he’s family, he’s also the Lord of Winterfell. And they’re not here for a family visit, but rather for business. Arya clings to Jon a little bit harder and tries to hide from her father’s steely gaze, but in the end she can’t resist peeking to see if he’s looking at her... only to find that he is.

“Arya... I’m quite confident that if I checked, I would find you were skipping out on some lesson planned by your mother and Septa Mordane. Please don’t make me check.”

Jolting, Arya finally detaches herself from Jon and for a moment she’s pretending to be a lady, all jerked motions and curtseys as she bobs her head.

“Yes father. Thank you father.”

With that, she races off... more specifically, she races off in the opposite direction of what Jon knows to be the rooms where Septa Mordane always gave her lessons to the castle girls back in the day. Somehow, he doesn’t think that the old Septa has changed her ways overly much...

But Lord Stark doesn’t call Arya out on it, smiling slightly as he watches her go. Then, he turns to the two of them and the smile drops.

“... Let’s take this to my solar, shall we?”

-x-X-x-

They’re soon situated in his father’s solar, with the Lord of Winterfell sitting behind his desk and Benjen taking the chair across from him. Jon is left standing, not that he minds very much. Honestly, he’s a bit too jittery to want to sit right now... to say nothing of the soreness from hours of hard riding anyways.

“The raven could only say so much, but I understand that there are wildlings massing north of the Wall. And that there’s a new King Beyond the Wall leading them as well. Benjen... how bad is it?”

The First Ranger huffs at that, sinking a bit further into his chair.

“It’s certainly not ‘good’, Ned.”

Jon’s father frowns at that, prompting Jon to clear his throat and draw the attention of both older men. After a beat, Benjen gives him a nod to continue.

“Lord Stark-”

Before he can continue, his father cuts him off with a raised hand.

“It’s just the three of us, Jon. Please, you don’t have to be so formal.”

Swallowing thickly, Jon hesitates for a second. Did he want him to call him Ned like Benjen did? Or...

“Father...”

Judging by the surprised but pleased look on his father’s face, that wasn’t what he intended, but he also wasn’t going to complain. Swallowing around the sudden lump in his throat, Jon focused on the matter at hand and continues on after a moment.

“Father, the wildlings aren’t the problem. The problem is what’s forcing them south.”

Eddard frowns at that, glancing to Benjen only for the other man to just nod grimly and gesture for him to continue listening to Jon. Bolstered by his uncle’s support, wordless thought it might be, Jon straightens up and says everything he wanted to say to the Lord Commander back at Castle Black.

“When the First Ranger and I went beyond the Wall, we didn’t just uncover proof of the wildlings massing. We uncovered proof that the Others have come back.”

That sends a jolt of alarm through his father, but Jon doesn’t stop, plowing forward relentlessly.

“In fact, both of us would be dead right now if it wasn’t for the wildlings who saved our lives. Our camp was attacked by wights early on in our ranging, and they forced us to flee north with barely any supplies. The dead hounded us for over a day before we came across a band of wildlings who helped us fight them off and provided us with shelter.”

Jon has to stop to suck in some air and wet his lips, which is where Benjen steps in and takes over.

“It’s true, Ned. Just a few hours north of the Wall is crawling with wights at this point. We even managed to capture one with the help of the wildlings. Brought it back to Castle Black and showed the Lord Commander... but you know how old man Mormont is. He’ll focus on the threat he understands over the threat he doesn’t any day of the week.”

Leaping back in before his father can even speak, Jon leans forward.

“But that’s just it, father. The wildlings aren’t the threat, not truly. Not unless we refuse to help them.”

That finally causes the Lord of Winterfell to raise a hand, stopping their back and forth in its tracks as he frowns harshly.

“... Elaborate on that. Refuse to help them... how exactly?”

Jon licks his lips and looks to his uncle but Benjen shakes his head and gestures as if to say ‘this one is all you’. Letting out a shuddering breath, Jon finds himself thinking of Ygritte and her smile as he straightens up and sets his jaw.

“We need to let them through the Wall, father.”

At the incredulous look on his father’s face, Jon raises his hands.

“I know, I know. But just think about it for a moment! The wildlings aren’t coming to the Wall because they want to invade, not this time! They’re gathering at the Wall because they’re desperate and afraid. Every wight attack culls more of their number and reinforces the enemy. Every body they can’t burn turns into another corpse for the Others’ army. If we don’t let them through, they’ll have no choice but to assault the Wall just to escape the White Walkers bearing down on them.”

Benjen pipes up again then, his voice grave.

“And you know the state of the Watch as well as I do, Ned. It’s like Jon’s saying, these aren’t just some savage glory hounds making a run for the Wall like in the past. This is a battle for survival for them. Every last living wildling is coming to the Wall. If they do decide to attack, the Watch will be annihilated. We simply don’t have the numbers to stop them.”

Silence falls after that. Jon and Benjen have said all they intended to say. Meanwhile, Eddard is silent, the Warden of the North sitting quietly as he processes it all. Jon twitches a bit, impatient, but he knows better than to interrupt his father when he’s thinking.

“... And you’ve seen the Others? You’ve laid eyes on a White Walker, just like from the old tales?”

That... brings a grimace to Benjen’s face, while Jon squirms a bit. In the end, Jon is forced to shake his head.

“No, father. It was only the wights for us. But there were dozens of them... hundreds, maybe. And the wildlings we spoke to, who saved us for no reason except to make sure we knew why they were coming south... they’ve seen them. They’ve seen the Others.”

Of course, this was why they hadn’t tried to argue their case with the Lord Commander. To a man like the Old Bear, wildlings were not to be trusted. They were the enemy, plain and simple. But Eddard Stark was hopefully not so stuck in his ways...

“I believe you.”

Benjen slumps in relief, while Jon literally crows in delight before getting ahold of himself. Unfortunately, they both celebrate a bit too soon.

“However, I cannot allow that many wildlings past the Wall. I do not have the authority.”

Jon’s eyes widen in disbelief. Even Benjen frowns, the First Ranger scoffing.

“You’re the Warden of the North, ain’t you Ned? What other authority do you need?”

Expression grave, Jon’s father sighs.

“Royal Authority, Ben.”

That causes both Jon and Benjen to pause, even as Eddard leans back in his chair clutching at its arms until his knuckles go white as he speaks through gritted teeth.

“The Gift and the New Gift both belong to the Night’s Watch. And I’m not a fool; I can tell that you didn’t tell Lord Commander Mormont nearly as much as you’ve told me. Without his approval, I can’t just allow the wildlings to come through the Wall. And I certainly can’t try to override him right now and risk having him or the King’s friends mention this to Axel Baratheon himself.”

Wait, friends? Jon and Benjen’s palpable confusion prompts Eddard to explain with a derisive snort.

“I suppose you didn’t see them since they’re camped south of Winterfell and you came from the north. Some of the Mountain Clans from the Vale

who fought in the war against Euron Greyjoy and the Iron Islands were given land in the New Gift by the King for their service. They've just finished making the long trek north and are preparing themselves to make the rest of the journey as we speak."

Benjen's eyes light up in remembrance.

"Ah... actually, I think I remember the Lord Commander mentioning something about that months ago..."

Giving his younger brother a dry look, Jon's father snorts derisively.

"Yes, I imagine he would have informed you. Just as I imagine it went in one ear and out the other, didn't it? After all, you're the First Ranger, not the First Steward."

Benjen flushes, but grins all the same, clearly taking the admonishment as the brotherly ribbing it was intended to be rather than anything more serious. Jon looks back and forth between the two older men for a moment before grunting.

"That's... that's fine and all, but the wildlings are still in trouble and the Others are still coming. What are we supposed to do? Just let them all die so that their bodies can join the Walkers' army of the dead? Or worse, let them destroy the Watch and take the Wall so that when the White Walkers do come, there's nobody left to defend it?"

Frowning, his father considers matters for a moment... before finally shaking his head.

"No. It's as I said, what we would need is Royal Authority. Luckily... your sister is the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms."

Jon blinks, causing his father to smirk.

“You ARE on good terms with Sansa, aren’t you?”

That... Jon jerkily nods, flushing a bit in surprise. He didn’t think his father knew that Jon and Sansa had long repaired their relationship. He was certain, after all, that his father’s wife did NOT know. But apparently Eddard Stark was more observant than he gave the man credit for.

“Then we have our path forward, don’t we? Benjen, you will take the Mountain Clans north and get them situated on their new lands. And if you can get any of them to offer even temporary support to the Wall during this situation, then hopefully Mormont will take what help he can get. Jon, you will go to White Harbor and take a boat south to King’s Landing, where you will convince your sister to give you an audience with the King.”

Letting out a weary sigh, his father rubs a hand across his face.

“If nothing else, Axel Baratheon is not the kind of man to shy away from a fight. I imagine just telling him about a King Beyond the Wall will get him to take action. Your true challenge will be convincing him that the wildlings aren’t the real threat, Jon.”

Jon frowns but nods. While he didn’t like having to go all the way to King’s Landing to get help for Ygritte and her people... he just had to hope they could hold out a little bit longer. Swallowing hard, he gives his father a bow.

“Thank you father. I promise I won’t let you down.”

In response, Eddard Stark rises from his chair, walks around his desk, and yanks Jon into a tight, bone crushing hug. For a moment, Jon doesn’t know

what to do... in the end, he hesitantly returns it, appreciating the embrace for what it is.

Though, at the end he's a little caught off guard when his father pulls away only to grab him by the back of his neck and stare him right in the eye.

"You never have, Jon. You never have."

Jon's eyes are wide, his throat closing up as Lord Eddard Stark claps him on the shoulders.

"Now go. And remember... Winter is Coming."

Never have those words felt more chilling.

-x-X-x-

A/N: Poor Arya, stuck with her mother and the Septa breathing down her neck. Meanwhile, Jon is off to King's Landing~

Please make sure to give me feedback either on Patreon or the Discord please! Every comment helps me shape the story with a Daily Free Write like this one!