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

4th Day of the 3d Moon, 303 AC

Aegon had decided to lead the assault on Storm's End himself, despite Griff's protests. He had remained in the camps during the storming of Gryffin's Roost, and the young king knew he had to prove himself in battle sooner or later.

Their plan was relatively simple, but it could have gone very wrong very fast. The fact remained that they needed Storm's End to have a solid grasp over the Stormlands. And if they failed to take it, their whole campaign would quickly crumble.

Storm's End was a formidable fortress. Since it was built eight thousand years ago, it has never fallen. The Andals had tried many times in ages past, only to be broken against its formidable walls. During the Rebellion, Stannis Baratheon held Storm's End despite being outnumbered a hundred times. The only way to take the fortress was through treachery or starvation.

The Usurper's brother had appointed one of his most leal men, Ser Gilbert Farring, to hold Storm's End and two hundred swords. Starving out the defenders would take moons, even if the granaries were not filled, but they could not afford even a single moon. They had to move before the Queen's trial ended quickly, or Mace Tyrell decided to return with the nigh endless might of the Reach.

The Golden Company was a formidable force, but they would lose when outnumbered more than four to one on an open field.

Yet, Aegon doubted that the Lord of Highgarden would be in any rush to return after the Dowager Queen had accused his daughter of lewdness, fornication, adultery, and high treason. With a single move, Cersei Lannister had aided their campaign far more than any victory on the battlefield could.

In the end, the Golden Company took Storm's End by deception. The garrison had been lax as the Tyrell host had left for King's Landing; the disjointed rumours about sellswords attacking Cape Wrath did not seem to worry them. Three men had gained entry disguised as cabbage farmers come to sell their wares, and due to the fierce autumn storm outside, they managed to bribe the steward to spend the night.

The unsuspecting sentries at the gate had been killed in the hour of the bat, the gate had been opened, and the sleeping defenders were slaughtered before they could muster any meaningful resistance.

Leading men into battle had been a sobering experience, not that what had transpired could be called such. In battle, one would expect fighting, manoeuvring, and the like. There was little resistance from the unprepared and drowsy defenders, most of whom didn't even have a weapon in hand, let alone any

armour. He had known that fighting was nothing like the songs he had heard as a boy. Still, the smell of shit, piss, and death made him puke his guts out. In the end, the garrison had quickly been overrun with only token resistance, and only the keep's maester was spared and confined to his rooms. The few servants and cooks, including the greedy steward, were killed because they couldn't be trusted.

Watching the light leave men's eyes after he gutted them had shaken the young king, but he had persevered.

Pity and mercy in battle can be your undoing. Steel your heart and do what needs to be done, lest you live to regret your follies later.

Griff's bitter advice weighed heavily on his mind, and so he had hardened himself and slew every man-at-arms in his way, armed or not. Still, after the fighting, he had barely found an empty chamber pot to relieve his stomach from his dinner.

Aegon entered the Round Hall with bone-deep weariness. He had not gotten a wink of sleep in nearly twenty hours, and the fighting had not done him any favours. Yet, even with this great triumph, no matter how much he wanted to find a feathered bed and close his eyes, Aegon couldn't rest just yet—his foes were still far stronger and more numerous than he.

Haste was paramount; there was no time to dally.

The Hall, whose stone walls had witnessed the court of the ancient Storm Kings since the Age of Heroes, was rather impressive. It was a large, circular chamber, albeit sparsely decorated, perhaps due to the lack of use in the past twenty years. A throne adorned by antlers stood on the dais at the top. Aegon decisively headed towards it and sat upon the highseat.

The other high-ranking men slowly streamed into the Hall. First entered Lysono Maar, the Golden Company's spymaster, behind him trailed Griff, also known as Jon Connington and his chosen Hand of the King. The other two men were Rolly Duckfield, his first Kingsguard, and Harry Strickland, the company's current commander. Aegon stood up and joined them on the high table, where Griff quickly unfurled a large map of Westeros.

The rest of the officers were not truly part of Aagon's council; Griff advised that he had to keep as many positions open for the Westerosi nobility as possible.

"Lysono," Aegon began. "Tell me of the Tyrells and the Lannisters."

"They have fielded nearly eighty thousand swords." The spymaster's voice was soft and ambiguous, just like his looks. It would be easy to mistake him for a woman, if not for the well-styled facial hair. "A quarter is with Garlan Tyrell, besieging Brightwater Keep. The Kingslayer and the Freys are pacifying the Riverlands with another quarter, a motley host scraped together from the Riverlords and the Westerlands. Randyll Tarly and Mace Tyrell have gathered at King's Landing with forty thousand men, staying in the city until Margery Tyrell's trial is over and she is declared innocent."

It was a naked threat, but one aimed at the Faith and the High Sparrow. But it suited Aegon's goals too well. The more his foes squabbled amongst each other, the easier victory would come.

"What of Dorne?" he asked, rubbing his weary eyes. "Will Prince Doran raise the Dornish spears for me?"

Ten thousand swords the Golden Company boasted, well-trained and seasoned, but ten thousand alone could not win the Iron Throne. Dorne commanded thrice that in spears, perhaps more. If the kingdom stood with him, his chances of success would swell.

Griff's face was carved from stone. "They remain... uncertain," he said at last. "Doubtlessly doubting my word. Many of them think Rhaegar's son long dead, his head squashed against the wall in Maegor's Holdfast. They mourned his passing long ago, so we had already expected this mistrust. Still, hope is not lost—Princess Arianne is leading a delegation from Sunspear to see for herself."

Aegon had expected this, but the words cut deeper than any sword could. Yet the ache in his chest only steeled his resolve—House Martell were his kin, and they would join him sooner or later.

"Very well," he murmured. "Let them come."

Griff cleared his throat, looking at the spymaster. "And what of Stannis Baratheon, Maar? How fares his campaign in the Northern snows?"

"There is a word of a great battle near Winterfell, and Bolton has emerged victorious." Lysono stroked his silvery goatee. "It was said that the flaming stag lost more men to desertion and snow than to fighting."

"Is Stannis dead?" Aegon asked, though he already suspected the answer.

"His body was indeed found, though the manner of his demise remains a mystery."

Even Griff, ever dour, allowed himself a breath of relief. Aegon even allowed himself a tired smile. With Stannis dead, the line of the rebellious stag was cut short for good. No matter how many blunders he had made before, his presence alone would be a threat to Aegon, and he would never sit easily in Storm's End or the Iron Throne. And now, that threat was gone.

"And the girl?" Griff pressed. "What happened to Shireen Baratheon?"

"Lost in the North or Bolton's hands. Some claim she disappeared before the battle, but in the end, nobody has heard or seen of her." Maar took a flask from his hip and swallowed a mouthful.

"Then she's dead," Griff said without hesitation. "A sickly whelp with greyscale and no friends, her future had long been cut before it began. In the Northern snows in late autumn, she's as good as dead."

It felt wrong to celebrate the demise of a young, innocent girl. She had done no wrong but to be born to the name of Baratheon. It was even easier that she had perished to no fault of his own. Yet Aegon felt

glad she was gone, and he hated himself for finding joy in it. His hands balled into fists. He should have been better than this.

“And thus ends the line of Baratheon,” Ser Strickland said with a dry chuckle. “Not in a blaze of glory, but with a whimper in the cold.”

“A fitting end for the grasping usurpers. But we have other foes to contend with now.” Griff’s gaze was set on the map as if it held the secret to their success, and he eventually tapped the Eyrie with his finger. “What of the Vale?”

“There is no movement from the Eyrie. Petyr Baelish hold his thoughts close and claims the young Robin Arryn will sit out the conflict, as Lysa Arryn did before him.”

The Vale. At least seven thousand heavy horse, thrice as many men-at-arms, still fresh, hidden away from the rest of the realm behind the Bloody Gate. Not a force that could be ignored, but not a host that could be forced to serve him either.

Aegon rubbed his face. His head pulsed with exhaustion, but sleep was still outside his grasp.

“Lord Connington,” he began, the words tasting strange in his mouth. “I would hear your thoughts—how would you proceed from here?”

He had known the man first as Griff, then as father, but now the world knew him as the Lord of Griffin’s Roost once more. Some might whisper of favouritism, but the truth was far plainer: Jon Connington had survived many battles and knew the cruel games and always-shifting allegiances of Westerosi nobility better than anyone here. Above all, Jon Connington was a man Aegon would trust with his very life.

The Lord Hand leaned over the war table, his greying hair catching the candlelight as he moved carved pieces across the painted map.

“We hold the Cape in its entirety. Storm’s End is ours, and with it, the heart of the Stormlands. The Tyrell host lies idle in King’s Landing. Like Mace Tyrell, they are overfed, overconfident, and too far involved in the games of court to move south quickly. This leaves us a window to act.”

His finger traced a line through the southern reaches of the Kingswood, then tapped upon two painted towers.

“Bronzegate. Haystack Hall. While not small keeps, they should be ripe for the taking after wasting their strength with Stannis and Renly. If we strike swiftly, we can take them before they raise a host or prepare for a siege. If the gods smile upon us and we’re fast enough, we can take them before they seal their gates. From there, we secure the Wendwater Bridge. The Tyrells will come, in time—but we’ll bleed them through the kingswood and rivers if they try to force a crossing. We need not meet them in an open field to hurt them. Delay, harass, and punish every step they take.”

“And from there, we’d hold most of the Stormlands and could raise more men,” Aegon said at last, rubbing his chin. “A sound plan. See it done, Lord Hand.”

The Eyrie

“Lord Robert is ill again, my lord,” Maester Colemon murmured. He was nervous again, his hands pinching at the sleeves of his grey robe.

Petyr let out a tired sigh. “Well then, treat him.”

The boy’s body remained weak, his spirit weaker still. Sweetrobin had never needed sweetsleep to drift toward death; he tottered there on his own, unbidden. Without Sansa, swaying Harry the Heir would prove more cumbersome than he liked, but still possible.

Colemon bowed, lips pressed into a thin line, and placed a scroll upon the desk. “And a message for you, Lord Protector.”

He left without another word, his footsteps dwindling from the hallway.

Baelish broke the wax and unrolled the letter, his eyes drinking in the words. His earlier joy quickly turned to ash.

Stannis Baratheon was dead. That much was welcome news, for as long as the stubborn stag pranced around, he could trample over many plots and plans if left unchecked.

The rest, however, only made him worry.

Many of his earlier plans had already been scrapped. Rumours of Sansa’s presence in the Vale had somehow reached King’s Landing more than half a year ago.

The Spider’s work, no doubt.

There was nothing directly damning, and it was little more than hearsay, but Petyr knew too well that whispers could be as deadly as the headsman’s blade, especially in the ear of someone as paranoid as Cersei. He had not yet been halfway through the negotiations with Lady Waynwood, and the Tyrells and the Lannisters had never looked stronger.

It had forced his hand to send the girl to the Boltons or risk losing her once the lions sniffed around. Still, he had tutored Sansa himself, and she had all the tools needed to take control of her childhood home on her own. The Boltons’ grasp over the North was tenuous, and she had plenty of cards to play. Even if Sansa had failed, the Boltons would owe him for bringing them legitimacy on a silver platter—so Baelish won regardless of the outcome.

Yet reality proved disappointing, and his ploy did not pay out this time. Had he grown sloppy? Everything had been working out far too easily of late. No, there was always a limit to improvising; he just had to make the best of his current situation.

Sansa Stark had escaped Winterfell, ruining both of his preferred arrangements. Word was scarce, but it was said her screams echoed through Winterfell's halls each night. Who would have thought that an ambitious old schemer like the Leech Lord could not even keep his son in line for the simplest of tasks?

Alas! Cat's daughter was ruined, and even if she survived, Sansa would be broken, angry and bitter. Petyr had seen what happened to women when they broke first-hand in his whorehouses, after all, and they had all lost their lustre. Because the Bolton Bastard didn't even know how to treat his lawful wife, Sansa was probably wroth with Petyr too. She had nowhere else to go but to her half-brother, Jon Snow, the last living son of Eddard Stark, if born on the wrong side of the sheets and cloaked in black.

By the time this message had reached him, Cat's daughter had probably arrived at Castle Black—assuming she had survived the journey. His mind turned to the situation on the Wall—Jon Snow had allowed passage to thousands of wildlings from Beyond the Wall, surely to call them to battle. With support from some of the northern Houses, they could easily topple the Boltons.

A moon to ride from Castle Black to Winterfell, less if one had a good horse or was desperate enough. A moon to raise the knights of the Vale in sufficient numbers. Two more moons to march from the Eyrie, down through the Bloody Gate, across the green of the Riverlands, and up the Neck. And all that only *if* Moat Cailin did not bar the way.

The Neck. Gods, what a miserable place. A narrow causeway, surrounded by wet marshes and crawling with bog devils and crannogmen. A handful of men could hold the causeway against an army, and the numbers proved meaningless in the marshes. Two hundred archers at the Moat could easily hold against any host the Vale could field.

By then, Sansa Stark and her half-brother would either be sitting in Winterfell, Petyr would be late to get any favours, or they would have already died trying. That was only if Catelyn's daughter had managed to escape alive. For all Littlefinger knew, Sansa could now be dead or on a ship to the Free Cities, forever out of his reach.

There was too much uncertainty, and he again cursed the difficulty of inserting spies in the North. Petyr needed to know more before committing the forces of the Vale to a course of action. Neutrality had served him well so far; his strength was preserved while everyone else was slowly bleeding out theirs. He just had to wait and sweep in after his opponents were too weak to resist. The North was too exhausted to matter anymore, and what Littlefinger could do was sow more chaos in the capital.

Kevan Lannister and Grand Maester Pycelle had been assassinated, and the balance of power in King's Landing was greatly skewed in favour of House Tyrell. Petyr had to trim the grasping roses before they

entangled themselves around Tommen and took full control of the Iron Throne. Yet the situation in the city was like an old pot of wildfire; a little push and everything would explode in green flames.

As Petyr inked his quill and began to pen his latest scheme, the shadow of a smile found its way to his face…

Sansa Stark

She felt warm and safe for the first time since her father died; most importantly, nothing ached. Her mind was a bit hazy, and it took her some time to regain her bearings. A faint yet sweet scent of burning oak mixed with a heavier fragrance of herbs and the soft crackling of burning wood was calming. She resisted the desire to drift back into the pleasant embrace of dreamless sleep, but instead cracked her eyes open only to see the concerned face of an unknown woman.

“How are ye feelin’, girl?”

Sansa swallowed her scream and pushed down her panic. She had seen worse before.

It was a craggy, weather-worn face, belonging to a tired woman clad only in furs, who wore a string adorned with sharp wolf teeth hanging from her neck.

A wildling.

She was old, older than her mother, and her wild brown hair had begun to grey, but her smile was too kind, too warm. Sansa felt her fear recede, leaving only caution behind.

Schooling her face, she uttered, “I feel quite well, but who are you? And where am I?”

“Name’s Arna, a woods witch. Yer crow brother asked me to check on yer wounds.” Fear crawled down her spine at the motion of someone seeing her scarred body. The old woman, however, patted her arm soothingly. “Don’t fret. Yer healin’ very well. Lord Crow will take care of whoever did this to ye.”

Her brother was alive!

“Was everything just a bad dream in the end?” Sansa mumbled to herself.

“What dreams, lass? Dreams have power.”

“I had this mad dream—I came to Castle Black, and Jon was dead, killed by his men. And I... jumped into his funeral pyre.”

Arna’s face became deathly serious. “T’was no dream, girl. It happened.”

The words struck her hard, leaving Sansa breathless. Had the world gone mad? This made no sense!

“Then why am I alive and feeling so well after jumping into a burning fire?” Sansa rubbed her face, frustrated. “And you mentioned my brother being alive.”

“Val told me ye lept into the fire, and it blew up. As mad as your brother,” The woman let out an amused cackle. “I felt it meself—great sorcery, screaming to all that could hear. ‘N when the fires died, yer crow brother jumped off the pyre alive, with three flying serpents and ye in his arms. Untouched by flames, like gods! They even call ye and Lord Snow firewalkers!”

The reverence on Arna’s face was plain to see.

Sansa stilled, unsure if she was awake and not dreaming and what to make of this… fanciful tale. On the one hand, this was the most ridiculous thing she had heard. On the other hand, the wildling woman looked deadly serious and had no real reason to lie.

Walking through the fire unburnt? Only Daenerys Targaryen was said to have done such a feat, but it was little more than a rumour, and Jon had nothing to do with Aerys’ daughter. True, nobody knew who his mother was, but the only Targaryen woman alive during the Rebellion was Queen Rhaella and Eddard Stark had never met her, to Sansa’s knowledge.

And flying serpents? Serpents did not fly, Sansa knew.

No, the wildling woman was not speaking of mere serpents.

Magic, fire, and serpents meant one thing. Dragons. But dragons were supposed to have long perished after the Dance, save for those queer rumours of Daenerys Targaryen in the far east. But Sansa knew better than to put any stock in rumours and hearsay.

Still, her confusion only grew the more she thought of it.

The warring thoughts must have shown on her face because Arne pointed to where the blankets covered her feet. “See for yerself, girlie.”

Sansa's eyes widened.

Two small, scaly lizards with wings, one blood red with golden wings, one deep purple with bronze crest, snored softly at the end of the bed next to her feet, curled into each other like scaly kittens. She blinked a few times, but the small dragons were still there, their slender bodies barely thicker than her wrist. Sansa pinched her hand and sucked in a sharp breath at the pain; it was not a dream either.

Dragons.

The sigil of House Targaryen in the flesh for the first time in a century and a half. Without a doubt, the beings in front of her were dragons. Sansa had seen drawings of newly hatched drakelings in her lessons with Maester Luwin and remembered them vividly.

She slowly rose in curiosity, trying not to wake them, as a thousand questions ran through her mind.

“Careful, lass, they spat fire at the last fool who got near,” the woods witch warned.

Sansa quickly pulled back her outstretched hand.

A glance told her that she was nearly naked under the furs, covered only in bandages. The woman did say she was tasked to take care of her wounds, and indeed, most of the pain from Ramsay’s ministrations was no longer there.

“You...bandaged me?” Sansa croaked out weakly, barely managing not to choke on her words. Arna simply nodded. “Did anyone else see?”

“Both ye and Lord Crow walked naked out of the pyre.” Sansa felt herself sinking into the bed. So many had seen her in all her ugly glory, covered by numerous scars and wounds. “The first thing he did was ta cloak ye and fetch fer a healer—me.”

The Lady of Winterfell collapsed on the bed and pulled in her fur covers, wishing to disappear. Deep inside, Sansa knew Ramsay had ruined her in almost every way possible, but showing it to others…

Arne gently patted her leg through the furs. “Don't worry, lassie. The bad men who did this? Yer crow brother will make them pay. Earlier, he slew those who killed him. Three heads rolled with one swing of his blade, and the last one he hanged, holding the rope with one arm! Ah, if only me was younger, I’d steal him no matter what!”

Just as Sansa was about to ask what this ‘stealing’ was all about, the door opened, and her heart skipped a beat.

Jon entered the room, *alive and well*. His eyes were dark purple now, but she could easily recognise that long face and the dark curls anywhere. Her brother had gotten quite tall and walked with a confidence that dominated the room. A dragon, bigger and more savage-looking than those on her bed, flew through the door and landed atop dark curls. The dark blue hatchling was larger than Jon's head, and it looked so comical she couldn't help but giggle, woes forgotten.

Jon chuckled along. “He's getting a bit too big to climb on me.”

He gently pried the big drakeling atop his head and placed it on the ground. It started squawking and screeching in protest, but a stern look from Jon silenced it.

“Are you really alive, Jon? I—This feels like a weird dream, and listening to what happened is just as unbelievable as seeing it.”

“Aye, I'm hale and hearty,” he said softly and sat on the edge of her bed. “As for what happened, I can only guess. Truth be told, the how and the why do not matter here. We’re both alive, and that’s enough for me.”

Her brother was unreadable, then. The softness from earlier drained away, leaving a troubled face behind. Sansa gave a hesitant nod—being alive was indeed what mattered. She did not want to think of the things that made her leap into the funeral pyre again.

“I'll come around to check up on the lass later,” Arna excused herself and quickly left the room.

Sansa’s stomach rumbled in hunger, and she blushed. Jon simply smiled at her and went outside. After a few short moments, he returned. “I asked for some stew. We’ll put some meat on those bones of yours.”

Realising that she was still nearly naked underneath, she asked quietly, “Jon, could you give me a moment to get dressed?” After nodding, he left the room again. She quickly put on the gown she saw lying next to the bed, all the while trying to ignore the thought that her brother had seen her naked. A minute later, she was finally presentable. “You can enter now.”

Jon walked to her, slowly extending his hand, “May I….” After she gave a small nod, he gently pulled her in a hug. He rocked her slowly and whispered in her ear. “Everything is going to be fine now.” A large, warm hand gently circled her back.

She had started sobbing without realising it.

Sansa had no idea how long they stayed in the embrace, but the world seemed brighter and warmer, and the painful knot in her stomach untangled itself. Eventually, Jon let her go and gently wiped away her tears.

“I’m not sure why or how I came back, but I can at least introduce you to the hatchlings.“ He ducked and ran his fingers through the spiky head of the dark blue dragon on the ground, who closed his eyes and let out a shivering *purr*. “This is named Winter.” He pointed at the curled ball of sanguine and gold. “That’s Bloodfyre, and the purple one is Stormstrider. You can touch them if you want.”

She looked at the creatures with wonder but hesitated, remembering what the woman had said earlier. “Really? Arna said they burned the fingers of whoever tried approaching them.”

“Aye, they don't like strangers at all. But you're my kin and have nothing to fear from them.”

After a few heartbeats of indecision, Sansa slowly extended her arm towards the red hatchling, who was now wide awake and was looking at her warily. As her hand approached, she began to waver, but Bloodfyre simply leaned her small, scaly head into her hand and quietly chuffed in pleasure.

Unexpectedly, it was warm and smooth to the touch. Sansa had no idea how, but *something* told her that the small red dragon was a she.

“See? I knew they'd like you.” Her brother’s words broke the spell.

“But Jon, how did you come to have dragons?” Sansa asked, fidgeting nervously. “Only the dragonlords could hatch and command dragons.”

“Lord Stark never told me who my mother was, no matter how hard I asked.” Jon’s voice had a tinge of sourness. “Before going south, he promised to tell me the next time we met, but alas….”

Her stomach twisted with guilt. Sansa always wondered if she could have done things differently in King’s Landing to prevent her father's death.

A knock on the door echoed, breaking the silence. Food had arrived as Jon went to the door and returned with a bowl of stew and a horn of ale. Sansa reluctantly tore herself from the red hatchling and moved to sit on the plain wooden chair at the small oaken table. Jon carefully placed the bowl of soup in front of her. Onions, uneven slices of carrots, and small chunks of mutton swam in the steaming broth.

Ignoring the wooden spoon, Sansa took the bowl in both hands, lifted it to her lips, and started drinking it in. It was nothing special, but to her hungry belly, it tasted better than the royal cuisine at King’s Landing.

Soon, the bowl was empty, and Sansa gazed at her brother.

Jon Snow had always been easy on the eye, but now, as a man grown, he was even more comely. The dark curls framed his clean, sharp face, and he could easily steal a maiden’s heart with his high cheekbones and amethyst eyes. Yet, he seemed so serene, like the dark pool of water before Winterfell’s heart tree, but she could recognise a storm brewing underneath.

She shuffled uneasily, remembering her earlier regrets. “I want to apologise."

“What for?” Jon asked, baffled.

“For… treating you badly back in Winterfell.” Her voice quivered in the end, betraying her nervousness.

“You never treated me badly, though,” he pointed out calmly.

“I was awful. Just admit it.”

Jon shook his head, chuckling, “My memory isn’t *that* bad. I remember you were never rude. You were always polite, proper, and busy with your embroidery and other pursuits to become a proper lady. Avoiding your sullen bastard brother is not a sin, Sansa.”

It was true, yet she couldn't help but recall her life as Alayne Stone and knew firsthand how the silent disdain, cold stares, and dismissal *hurt*.

"Can you forgive me?" she pressed stubbornly. Jon kindly tried to downplay what he had gotten used to, but she would not budge.

"There is nothing to forgive."

"Forgive me!"

"All right, all right. I forgive you," her brother finally relented with a smile.

Sansa laughed sweetly and held her hand for Jon's horn of ale. He handed it over; she sipped and started coughing at the stinging feeling in her throat.

Jon cracked a smile at her antics. "You'd think the Night's Watch would have learned how to make good ale after thousands of years. It's barely better than water."

"You call this weak?!"

"Aye." Her brother let out an amused huff, and she chuckled at his antics.

Silence fell between them as the two siblings measured each other. How long had it been since nobody had looked upon her with hatred, lust, disdain, or suspicion?

All she could find in Jon's eyes was warmth and kindness. It reminded her of a better time, when everything was still right in the world. He was content with the silence, but she started to fidget, unable to hold his gaze for long.

"What will you do now?" Sansa finally asked what was truly on her mind as she returned the horn to Jon. She had no idea how her brother stood with the Watch or what ambitions he harboured.

"I'll probably leave this thrice-damned place." He drained the rest of the beer with a single swig.

"What about your vows?

"Night gathers, and now my watch begins. *It shall not end until my death,*" Jon recited, voice solemn. "I've recently died, so my vows are fulfilled, and my watch has ended."

An amused chuckle tore from his lips before escalating into full-blown laughter, as if he had said the biggest jape in his life.

"Don't jest about this," she chided, gently smacking his arm. "What now?"

"What now?" Jon echoed, face finally serious as his hand ran through his dark curls. “Well, anywhere south of here, that's for sure. Being north of the Wall isn't good for your well-being.”

He smiled cheekily at her. “I'd love to take Winterfell back from the Boltons, but little news reaches the Wall, and I trust them even less. I only know the barest of things—Joffrey executed Lord Stark for treason, Robb called the banners, and was eventually killed during a treacherous wedding by the Freys and the Boltons. The Ironborn took Winterfell and killed Rickon and Bran, and now the Flayed Man holds Winterfell and the North.”

“Theon said he did not kill Bran and Rickon. He couldn’t find them and had the burned corpses of two miller boys presented in their stead.”

“Theon ‘*The Turncloak*’ Greyjoy?” Jon’s voice had an icy edge, and his eyes darkened. The room felt colder, and Sansa pulled her fur-lined cloak closer. “The same man who enjoyed Winterfell’s hospitality for years and was treated like a brother in all but blood by Robb?”

“I know you're wroth at him, Jon.” Her brother snorted. “I was also angry at him when I saw him again. But in the end, he suffered under Ramsay more than even I. It was Theon who saved me from certain death and helped me escape Winterfell.”

Jon's face softened slightly, and he simply sighed and switched the topic. “Do you know what happened to Arya?”

“She disappeared after Father was arrested,” Sansa recounted with a frown. “Nobody has heard or seen anything about her. Even Littlefinger and the Lannisters assumed her dead.”

“If anyone could make it out alone, it’s Arya. No news is better than bad news.” He took a deep breath and continued, “I have no idea how many men House Bolton has or are loyal to the Flayed Man. The wildlings should be willing to provide me with some support. But the exact number remains to be seen. They also mostly wear fur and leather for armour; instead of steel, they wield bronze, bone, or stone and have no formal training at arms. Yet, any lack of skill is made up by rugged ferocity.”

Sansa looked at Jon in wonder. She would have agreed to go anywhere with her brother, but the desire to return to her ancestral home remained deep inside. It would have irked Sansa to leave Winterfell to their foes as if they had won, but she would have agreed to flee.

“Can the wildlings truly help us win?”

“We don't have much choice at the moment. Only death awaits us to the north; nobody has gone west and returned successfully to tell the tale, and in Essos, I'll become a target because of my dragons. Since we’re going to be fighting wherever we go, we might as well regain our ancestral seat.” He gave her a wan smile. “Anything you can tell me about House Bolton and their allies would be very helpful.“

Sansa yawned before speaking up, “I heard during a feast that Lord Bolton had mustered five thousand swords to fight Stannis, though that included the forces from Dustin and Ryswell.”

Her speech became slower and slower as she went on. A wave of tiredness hit her.

Jon’s eyes were filled with concern.

“Enough for now. It seems you’re in dire need of rest,” he said. Sansa tried to protest, but only a yawn escaped her lips. The soft crackling of the hearth made her feel even drowsier. Her body felt too heavy, and he simply ushered her into the bed and tucked her under the fur covers. “I’ll be in my quarters if you need me. That’s the only other room on this floor.”

Her eyelids felt heavy. Before Jon could close the door on his way out, Sansa was asleep.