

Jon Snow

The high table felt different when you sat closer to the middle.

Jon had eaten at this table a hundred times, maybe more, always at the far end where the candlelight thinned and the conversation became a distant hum. Tonight, someone had placed him four seats from his father. Still not beside Lord Stark, not where Robb usually sat, but close enough that the warmth of the hearth fires reached him properly and the food arrived hot instead of cooling on its journey down the table.

He should have been happy about it. He'd wanted this. Every feast, every formal dinner, every time he'd been shunted to the edge like an afterthought, he'd imagined what it would feel like to sit here, among them, as though he belonged.

Now he had it, and all he could think about was the empty chair beside him where Robb should have been.

The chicken was good. Northern herbs, rosemary and thyme from the Winterfell gardens, and thin slices of lemon that had come up from Dorne with the last trade caravan. The sourness of the lemon cut through the richness of the meat, and Jon ate with more appetite than he expected, washing each bite down with dark ale that tasted of peat and barley.

"You were the fastest," Arya told him from across the table, for the third time. She was leaning forward on her elbows, her dress already wrinkled, a smear of gravy on her chin that she either didn't notice or didn't care about. "When you swept Torrhen's legs, I counted. One heartbeat. That's all it took. One."

"You were counting heartbeats?"

"Septa Mordane says ladies should observe and reflect." Arya grinned. "I was observing."

"And what did you reflect?"

"That Torrhen should've kept his guard low." She tore a piece of bread in half. "Also that you're better than everyone. But I already knew that."

Jon smiled. "Don't let Ser Rodrik hear you say that. He'll add another hour to my drills."

Beside Arya, Bran was bouncing in his seat. He'd been watching Jon since the feast began with the same expression he wore when he spotted a new tower to climb.

"How did you know to feint left before the sweep?" Bran asked, his food untouched. "Against the Manderly knight, the tall one. You went left and then your sword came from the right and he didn't even see it. Was that something Ser Rodrik taught you?"

"No."

"Was it from a book? There's that passage in Ser Adron's treatise about misdirection in close quarters. Is that where you-"

"Bran." Jon set down his cup. "I just felt it. The opening was there and I moved into it. There's no book for that."

"You fight like Ser Barristan Selmy," Bran announced.

Jon raised an eyebrow. "You've never seen Barristan the Bold fight."

"I've read about him. In Maester Luwin's histories. It says he moved like water, and that no man who faced him could predict where the next strike would come from." Bran's eyes were wide and serious. "That's you. You're like water."

"Water." Jon took a drink. "I'll remind you of that next time I slip on ice in the yard."

Bran laughed, a high, bright sound. Arya laughed too.

Then Jon's eyes drifted down the table.

Sansa sat three seats away, her posture perfect, her auburn hair braided with green ribbons that matched the Manderly colors. A courtesy, probably. Lady Catelyn's idea. She caught Jon looking at her, and her lips pressed together. She gave him a small nod, the kind a lady gives to a man she recognizes but isn't sure she's supposed to acknowledge. Then she turned back to her food.

Jon looked away. That was Sansa. Never cruel, never warm. Just uncertain, as though she'd been given a set of rules for how to treat everyone in Winterfell except him, and the gap troubled her without quite moving her to fill it.

Lady Catelyn, beside Sansa, had no such uncertainty. Her eyes found Jon and held. The look was the same one she'd worn in the courtyard when his sword had been at Robb's throat. Cold. Furious. Final.

Jon turned back to his chicken.

He heard the doors before he saw them open. Boots on stone, voices, and then the Manderly party was entering, Lord Wyman at the front, rolling into the

hall like a galleon under full sail. His sons flanked him, Wylis and Wendel, both armored in courtesy if not in steel.

Behind them came the granddaughters. Wynafryd in pale blue, her brown hair loose over her shoulders. And beside her, walking with Robb.

Jon's chest tightened.

Robb looked clean and composed, his auburn hair combed, his hand resting on the crook of Wynafryd's arm. He pulled her chair out, said something that made her smile. Then he sat beside her.

Look at me, Jon thought. Just once. Look this way and I'll know we're fine.

Robb did not look at Jon. Not once.

The tightness in Jon's chest sank and stayed. He reached for his ale and drank until he could breathe around it.

"Well fought, lad! By the Seven, well fought!"

The voice came from his left, loud enough to cut through the hall's noise like a horn through fog. Jon turned.

Ser Wylis Manderly had appeared beside him. How a man that broad had arrived without Jon noticing was its own question. He was red-faced and grinning, a cup of wine in one thick hand, his green surcoat straining at the buttons.

"Ser Wylis." Jon straightened. "Thank you."

"Thank me? I should be thanking you. That was the finest melee I've seen since the Tourney of White Harbor three years past. And I've seen my share, mind you. At White Harbor, we host tourneys twice a year, sometimes three if the harbour taxes come in strong, and I've watched knights from the Reach and the Stormlands and even a few from the bloody Westerlands, pardon my tongue, and I'll tell you what-" Wylis leaned closer, and Jon could smell wine and roast pork and something floral, an oil in his beard, perhaps, "-not one of them moved the way you did today. Not one."

"That's kind of you to say."

"Kind has nothing to do with it. I know swordwork when I see it. My brother Wendel, now, he's the fighter in our family. I'm more of the administrative sort. But I've watched enough steel to know the difference between a man who's trained and a man who was born for it." Wylis drained half his cup and refilled it from a nearby pitcher without pausing for breath. "Reminds me of a tourney we attended in the South. A proper southern tourney, not our northern affairs. Jousting, melee, archery, the whole spectacle. Knights in polished plate, pavilions of silk, ladies throwing favours from the galleries. Different world, the South."

Jon straightened. "How far south have you been?"

Wylis opened his mouth, but another voice answered first.

"Highgarden."

Jon turned.

Wylla Manderly sat in the chair to his right. She was watching him with a directness that reminded him, oddly, of Arya, though the resemblance ended there. Her green hair fell past her shoulders, vivid against the pale grey of her

dress. Her face was round, her nose small, her eyes blue enough to look almost grey in the candlelight. Cute more than pretty, he'd thought in the courtyard. Up close, the word felt insufficient without a replacement coming to mind.

She was not supposed to be sitting there. That chair had been empty all evening. At every meal since the Manderlys arrived, Wylla had sat near Sansa, among the girls, trading stories about songs and southern fashions and whatever else occupied noblewomen when men weren't listening.

"Wylla." Wylis turned to his daughter, surprised. "I thought you were sitting with the Stark girls."

"I was." Wylla picked up a cup from the table and held it while a servant filled it, as if she'd been sitting there the whole feast. "Now I'm sitting here."

She said it the way someone might say the sun rose this morning. Jon noticed she didn't offer an explanation, and neither Wylis nor anyone else pressed her for one.

Wylis blinked, opened his mouth, then seemed to decide that arguing with his daughter at a feast was a battle he had lost before and would lose again. He took a long drink of wine and went back to describing a knight from Oldtown who'd been unhorsed into a water trough.

"You were asking my father about the South," Wylla said. She turned her cup between her fingers, not drinking yet, just holding it. "What do you want to know?"

Jon hesitated. He wasn't sure what he'd expected from her. Polite conversation, maybe. The kind of pleasant nothing that noblewomen were trained to produce, all curtsies and weather and *have you tried the cake*. But

Wylla was looking at him the way you looked at someone you intended to have a real conversation with.

"Your father mentioned Highgarden," Jon said. "I've read about it, but reading and seeing aren't the same. What's it like?"

Wylla leaned forward. Not the way Sansa did when she talked about the South, all dreamy longing for something she'd built from songs and stories. Wylla had been there.

"It smells," she said.

Jon blinked. "It smells?"

"Like everything is blooming at once. You walk through the gates and the air itself changes. In White Harbor, the air tastes like salt and fish. At Highgarden it tastes like someone crushed a garden into the wind." She took her first sip of wine. "The first morning I woke up there, I thought I was dreaming. I opened the shutters and the whole Mander Valley was gold with sunlight, and the orchards below the castle stretched so far I couldn't see where they ended. There were peach trees. Rows and rows of them, heavy with fruit. I'd never eaten a peach off the branch before. It felt like biting a piece of the sun."

Jon was leaning toward her. He sat back.

"The music is different too," Wylla continued. "In the North, songs are about dead heroes and lost battles. Every ballad ends with someone freezing or bleeding or both. At Highgarden they sing about lovers and harvests and the way light looks on water at dusk. I'm not saying their songs are better. Some of them are awful, honestly, there was one about a maiden and a butterfly that went on for forty verses and I wanted to drown the singer by verse twelve."

She paused. "But they weren't sad. That was the strange part. I didn't know songs could just be... happy."

Jon thought of his own book, *Songs of the North*, the one his father had given him when he was eight. She was right. He couldn't think of a single one that didn't end in death or exile or sorrow.

"Do you miss it?" he asked.

Wylla considered this. "I miss the warmth. Not the people. Well. Some of the people. But mostly the warmth. And the peaches." She glanced at him sideways. "You've never been south of the Neck, have you?"

"I've never been south of Winterfell."

"You should go. Someday." She said it with a smile. "The world is bigger than the North, Jon Snow. I love the North. But you can love a place and still want to see what's past the horizon."

He had never really given south that much thought; he was so used to living inside the walls of Winterfell that sometimes, he forgot that there was a world out there, beyond these walls, and a place where it wasn't so cold all the time. Air that tasted like flowers instead of frost. Songs that didn't end in graves.

"My father says the North is enough," Jon said.

"Your father is Lord of Winterfell. The North is everything to him. That doesn't mean it has to be everything to you."

Jon looked at her. She met his gaze and held it, and he didn't look away.

"Why are you sitting here?" he asked. "And not with Sansa and the other girls?"

"Because Sansa is talking about embroidered sleeves," Wylla said, "and I would rather eat my own hand."

Jon laughed, and Arya's head snapped up from three seats down.

"What's funny?" Arya demanded, suspicious of any laughter she hadn't caused.

"Nothing," Jon said.

Arya ignored this entirely and leaned forward, craning past Bran to get a better look at Wylla. Her grey eyes narrowed.

"Why is your hair green?"

Bran went wide-eyed. Jon winced.

But Wylla didn't flinch. She turned to face Arya with the same directness she'd shown Jon.

"I dyed it," Wylla said.

"On purpose?"

"On purpose."

Arya tilted her head, processing this. "But why green? Sansa's hair is auburn like our mother's, and mine is dark like Father's." She tugged at her own hair, as if producing evidence. "Those are just the colors we were born with. You chose green?"

"I did."

"Why?"

Wylla set her cup down and leaned back. A smile was forming at the corners of her mouth.

"Because people kept calling me 'the other one.'"

Jon frowned. "The other one?"

"The other Manderly girl. Wynafryd is the eldest. She's the pretty one, the smart one, the one they talk about when they're discussing matches and alliances. I was always 'and the younger one.' At tourneys, at feasts, at court. 'Lord Manderly arrived with his granddaughter Wynafryd, and the younger one.' As though I didn't have a name. As though I was something Wynafryd carried in her luggage."

Arya's scowl deepened.

"So one morning," Wylla continued, "I found a dye merchant in the harbour. An old woman from Tyrosh who sold pigments off a cart. I asked her for the strongest green she had. Not a subtle green. Not an almost green. Green as sea grass. Green as the Manderly banner. Green as nothing anyone had ever put on their head on purpose."

"Your grandfather let you?" Jon asked.

"My grandfather laughed so hard his chair broke." Wylla's smile widened. "He said anyone with that much nerve had earned the right to her own hair. My father was furious for about a day. My septa refused to speak to me for a month, which was the finest month of my life. And Wynafryd just looked at me

and said, 'You're going to have to keep doing it now, you know. If you stop, they'll think you gave in.' So I kept doing it."

"And nobody calls you 'the other one' anymore," Arya said. She was grinning.

"Not once." Wylla lifted her cup. "Not ever."

Arya looked at Wylla the way she looked at people she had decided to keep. Then she looked at Jon, and her grin sharpened like a blade.

"I like her," Arya announced to the table. Then she went back to her food, apparently satisfied.

Jon turned back to Wylla. She was drinking her wine, watching the hall with that same calm look she'd worn since she sat down.

"Tyroshi dye," Jon said. "Does it wash out?"

"Not if you buy the good kind." Wylla ran a hand through her green hair.

"Why? Thinking of trying it yourself? Silver and green might suit you, Jon Snow."

His hand went to the silver streaks at his temple. Wylla's eyes followed the movement, but she didn't ask.

"I think I'll keep what I have," Jon said.

"Probably wise. You'd look ridiculous."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." She picked up a piece of chicken from the platter between them. "Now. You were asking my father about the South, and he was telling

you about himself, which is what he does. Ask me instead. I'll tell you about the places, not just the tourneys."

Jon looked at her. Green hair, blue-grey eyes, that stubborn jaw. Sitting in a seat no one had assigned her.

He cut into his chicken. "Tell me about Oldtown."

Wylla smiled. She did, and Jon listened, and for the rest of that feast he forgot to watch Robb.

The music began as the servants cleared the last of the platters.

Jon recognized the tune, something light and southern that the musicians had learned for the Manderly visit. Couples were already forming on the floor below the high table. He watched Sansa rise gracefully, accepting Ser Wendel's offered hand with a perfect curtsy. Bran had slipped away somewhere, probably to climb something he shouldn't. Arya remained planted in her seat, glowering at anyone who looked like they might approach.

Jon stayed where he was. A bastard asking a trueborn girl to dance was the kind of presumption that turned pleasant evenings into cold shoulders. He'd learned that at his first feast, years ago, when he'd been foolish enough to approach one of the Umber girls. The memory still made his stomach tighten.

Besides, he was terrible at dancing. All those lessons with the dancing master his father had insisted on, and Jon still moved like he was wearing armor instead of silk.

So he sat. Watched. Drank his ale.

But Wylla wasn't dancing either.

She stayed in her chair beside him, fingers drumming against her cup in time with the music. He caught her looking his way more than once. She didn't pretend she hadn't been.

Half the young knights in the hall would trip over themselves for a chance to lead a Manderly granddaughter through a pavane. Yet there she sat, green hair shining like morning grass, watching him watch the dancers.

Ask her.

The voice. Jon's hand tightened on his cup.

I can't, he thought back. It wouldn't be proper. She's a lady, I'm-

You're the boy who won tonight. You're the one they're all talking about. Ask her to dance.

The voice went quiet.

Jon looked at the dancers on the floor. At Sansa turning smoothly through the steps. At the space beyond the last row of tables where the candlelight thinned. He could leave. Walk back to his chamber. Nobody would think twice about the bastard slipping out early.

He pushed back his chair and stood.

Wylla looked up at him.

"Lady Wylla." His voice held. "Would you care to dance?"

She was already reaching for his hand.

"I thought you'd never ask," she said.

