

The Black Wolf Lives

a *Game of Thrones* fanfic

by **Rodo**

IT WAS A stone that saved Rickon Stark's life. Jon saw him running over the grassy fields past the macabre distance markers put up by the Bolton forces. He had grown so big, Jon thought, when his horse had finally carried him near enough to clearly make out his brother's curly hair. But then he saw the arrow miss his brother and all coherent thought left his mind. The only thing he could think of was his brother's lanky form, desperately hurrying towards him as yet another arrow narrowly missed. Jon spurred on his horse. He was almost there. He could see Rickon's eyes, wide with fear, and the tiny glimmer of hope within them – and then Rickon stumbled and fell face first into the dirt and an arrow flew past where his head had been a mere moment before.

Jon was off his horse and on top of his brother before Ramsay Bolton could nock and loose another arrow. He covered Rickon's body with his own, but no arrow came as they lay there shivering. Jon heard his horse whinny nearby, and then the ground began to tremble rhythmically. The army was advancing. They had to get away, but there was little time.

“Rickon, you have to listen to me very carefully now,” Jon told his brother, who stiffened beneath him. “I'm going to get up, and so are you. You'll stay behind me at all times, do you understand?”

Jon felt Rickon nod and then stood up. When he turned around, he saw the Bolton infantry advance, a shadow rising behind them.

“Back down!” he screamed before throwing himself over his brother yet again, and this time, the arrows did fall. Two hit Jon – in his armored torso, thankfully, although the tips still pierced his skin. Jon gritted his teeth and grunted with each impact, but he tried to keep still. The last thing he needed now was Rickon panicking. He was close enough to it himself. They were stuck, the Bolton forces

were advancing and Jon could hear the dying wheezes of his horse, which had made a much bigger and far less protected target. There was no way they could get away. Another volley descended on them, and another arrow hit the back of Jon's left leg – fortunately, without doing too much damage. They would keep shooting until their own army was too close, but there was nothing he could do but protect his brother with his own body for the moment.

“We’re going to die,” Rickon mumbled. “Like Osha and Shaggy.”

Jon wished he could tell him they would not, but he had never been a good liar.

Then another sound joined the measured march of the Bolton army. Less-ordered stomping accompanied by a thousand deafening roars; the wildling army was approaching, and it was going to be a disaster, Jon knew. But it was too late to think about that now. The thud of boots approached them from both sides. The arrows had stopped falling. The battle was about to begin.

As the Stark forces passed them, a hand grabbed the back of Jon's armor and pulled him to his feet.

“Time to fight now, Lord Snow,” Tormund Giantsbane growled. The two shared a look. Beyond Tormund's shoulder, Jon saw the wildlings crash against the orderly Bolton lines like surf against a bluff. On the sides, he could see the left and right flanks of the Bolton infantry close in on them. The cries of the victorious and the dying began to rise around them.

Jon looked back to Rickon, who had gotten to his feet as well and stared at the fighting men in fear.

“Stay close to me,” Jon told his brother. “And take this.” He handed Rickon his dagger; it was better than being completely helpless in what was to come. They would die or they would live, Jon thought, but he would be damned if he outlived his brother. Then he turned his attention to the enemy, drew his sword and charged.

“For Winterfell!”



The courtyard was a mess. Jon barely recognized it as the same place where he used to have snowball fights with his siblings, where he learned to ride when he was six and where Ser Rodrik taught him and Robb how to fight. But Robb was gone, and so were Ser Rodrik, Arya, Bran, Old Nan, and all the other people that

had made Winterfell the warm home it was in his memories. A flutter of cloth caught Jon's attention. Rickon was up in the keep, cutting down the Bolton banners with an angry frown that made him look younger than he actually was. He seemed more like the little boy from years ago who insisted on naming his direwolf Shaggydog despite his siblings' protests. The dagger he used was still bloody. His little brother had helped kill the Smalljon by jabbing at his knee in the crush. Tormund had delivered the killing blow, but Rickon had got his revenge as well. He was almost a man. And he was alive, that was what counted, even if so many others had to die to save him. Wun Wun was still lying in the courtyard, one of the last of the giants, and Jon had to suppress the sudden urge to cry.

"I'm sorry," Sansa said, startling him. Jon hadn't noticed her approach. "I'm sorry I didn't believe in you. You said you would save him, and I should have believed you. Instead, I gave up on him."

Jon looked at his sister. She had saved them, he knew, and he felt a strange mixture of gratitude and anger. But now was not the time to address that; there were men gathering the falling banners while others put the fallen on a cart. Sansa felt troubled, he could tell, and guilty. And Jon could understand that, just as he understood that no matter how much he hated Ramsay Bolton, it was Sansa's and Rickon's right to determine what became of him.

"You've nothing to be sorry for. You were right, you know? If Rickon hadn't stumbled at the right moment, he would have died, and everything would have been for nothing."

All this death, he mused. They had Winterfell, they had the North, but he still didn't feel as if they had won. Too many dead lay in the fields beyond their walls, and the Night King was drawing nearer every day.

"But he didn't die," Sansa said. "And neither did you. And I am so, so glad for it. I will pray to the gods in thanks for years. We all could have died today."

That Jon was very aware of. And a part of him longed for the darkness and emptiness that he remembered from his own death. But he wouldn't wish it on his brother and sister. They deserved to live full and happy lives before they entered the void.

"But we didn't," he argued. "Thanks to you."

Sansa blushed slightly. "And thanks to you. Now, where is he?"

She looked around until she spotted Rickon, then ran to him and hugged him tightly, just as she had done with Jon all those months ago. Rickon patted her

back, and they whispered something to each other; then they separated and turned to Jon, and he smiled.

For a moment, they all simply stood amidst the chaos of the aftermath of battle and looked at each other, and for once, Jon didn't feel as alone as he had for months, or maybe years. They were Ned Stark's children, and they were finally home.



Sansa wished her brother hadn't elected to accompany her to the kennels. He was so young. As young as Bran had been when she had last seen him lying in his bed, before she left for King's Landing. So maybe not that young at all, especially if she considered what he had gone through. She wondered what Ramsay had done to him in the weeks he'd been at his mercy. Wondered, but did not ask. Rickon would tell her, or he would not, but Ramsay had killed his protector, the only friend he'd had in the past few years. He had just as much a right to be here as she did.

"Ah," Ramsay remarked when he saw them through the bars. "If it isn't my lovely wife and her little scamp of a brother. Come to gloat?"

Sansa shivered a little when she heard his voice, and cursed herself for it, but on the outside she remained calm. She had years of practice to fall back on. And he didn't look as scary any more, tied as he was to a chair within a cage. He would never harm her again. He would never harm Rickon again.

"No," Ramsay continued. "Our time together is coming to an end. But I will never truly leave you. I'll be with you for the rest of your life. I'm a part of you now, Sansa."

She exchanged a look with Rickon. He was clearly angry, but lacked the words to express his anger. She felt a surge of warmth run through her when she looked at him. She would make sure he would see Ramsay get the end he deserved.

"Your words will end. Your house will end. Your name will end. And soon enough, nobody will remember you ever existed."

Ramsay grimaced, but Rickon had already opened the gates to the adjoining kennels. Ramsay's hounds slowly emerged from their confinement, sniffing at the dried blood in the air. Sansa wanted to smile, but she would wait until her task was done.

"These are my hounds," he protested, and she saw him struggling against his

bonds. “They are loyal beasts and they would never hurt me.”

“You haven’t fed them in a week,” Rickon reminded him. “They were loyal. Now they’re just hungry.”

And Rickon was proven right when mere moments later, the first of Ramsay’s hounds took a tentative bite out of her master’s chin. Ramsay screamed and cursed and tried to order his dogs to cease, but they wouldn’t listen, and soon all that remained were pained whimpers and the sound of starving dogs sating their hunger on their living tormentor. Sansa watched with a small smile on her face, and when she looked to her brother, he too looked relieved. A part of her felt sorry for the loss of innocence he had suffered. Another was glad to have delivered justice to the both of them.



The lords of the North and the Vale had assembled in the Great Hall of Winterfell. It was still in a state of disrepair, but there were chairs and tables enough for all of them. Sansa had made sure there was food and ale for all of them, despite their lean larders, and she’d made sure she knew who was who. Jon’s wildling friends sat on the left, next to the wall, while the lords occupied the middle of the room. Only Littlefinger kept himself on the right, hiding in the shadows, like the cockroach she knew him to be. At the head of the table, only three people sat. Sansa was on the right, Jon on the left, and between them, Rickon looked at the lords with all the confidence of a Lord Paramount.

“The North remembers,” little Lyanna Mormont announced, when the lords would not believe Jon’s warning. “We know no king but the King in the North, whose name is Stark. He may be young, but he is Ned Stark’s son, and I will follow him wherever it may lead me.”

When Lord Manderly knelt and swore his sword to Rickon, when the lords knelt and declared her brother king, Sansa’s heart skipped a beat. The title had killed Robb; would it kill Rickon as well? She looked to Littlefinger, who viewed the procession with calculating eyes, and at once, she knew who her brother’s greatest foe would be. A Stark ruling the North was not in his interest. He wanted her to rule, and he wanted her to be his. Sansa looked to Jon, who seemed just as worried as she was, even if nobody unfamiliar with his stony face would be able to read it. She could see her own worries reflected on his face. Then he

nodded at her. They would do what they could to protect their little brother – flayed men, mockingbirds, lions, dragons and even the undead be damned. Rickon Stark would live; they would make sure of it.

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