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WINTERFELL was still the same as Lyra remembered it. The turrets stood tall into the sky, trenches piled high with snowdrift and the frozen lakes remained thick. White and grey banners waved gaily in the wind as Lyra rode past the gate, rejoicing in a winter daughter returned home.

A reception was gathered before the entranceway of the castle, of Starks and bannermen. Lyra pulled up in front of them with Daemon, grinning as brightly as a summer's sun. She dismounted before rushing forwards with eager arms. The first to envelop her in an embrace was her father.

The few years had turned him into a grizzly old bear of a man. The corners of his stormy grey eyes creased with fine lines as he smiled gladly at her. "My daughter, my firstborn. You have come home at last."

"Father, I missed you," she whispered happily into his shoulder. She felt cracks in her heart start to mend themselves at the sound of his voice. A comfort that was not offered anywhere else.

Next was her mother then Cregan who was almost the same age as Rhaenyra. When she left Winterfell, he had barely been three. Now he could hold his own sword and his unruly raven head reached as high as her waist.

Then her cousins swarmed her, inciting raucous cheers from the rest of the welcoming party. Familiar faces that had borne witness to her in a cradle, shot her first arrow, helped her onto a horse and frolicked under the falling snows. Her heart had never felt so full and alive, singing in a rapture.

Before she could get lost in the rollicking crowd, she pulled her children forward. It was the first meeting of their grandsire for Vaegon and Alyse. She wanted her father to see them and love them as she knew he would.

Rickon Stark picked the both of them up, each sitting on an arm while giggling and pulling at his silver-tip beard. "What beautiful grandchildren you have bestowed on me, Lyra," he said with a grin.

Daemon held Baelor in his arms too, lest the boy felt let out. "Well, she can't take all the credit, Lord Stark," he remarked.

Rickon laughed boisterously. "Aye, I'll give you that. What do you say about bringing them to meet Sharra? You Targaryens have your beasties and we have ours."

"I think they'll love Sharra," Daemon responded with a devilish smirk. "Is Sharra a dragon too?" Alyse asked, already attempting to braid her grandfather's hair.

"Oh, she's better than any dragon on this side of the realm, little one," Rickon told her.

Lyra gaped at them as their voices and backs grew further away, down the dim oaken halls. Sharra was her father's warhound, a large beast that had tasted man flesh more often than they cared to admit. Bred for hunting runaway criminals and deserters, she was blacker than any craven heart on the Wall.

Her good-cousin slid up next to her. "He'd been visiting Winterfell every year while you were gone, didn't you know?" Ellis studied her expression with amusement. "He tamed Sharra, so to speak, I suppose he has a way with beasts. And now your lord father treats him like a son of his own."

Lyra's smile soiled by the thought. "He hadn't told me."

Ellis tugged on her arm, pulling her away to the main hall where the Northmen awaited her. Outside the walls of the castle, she could hear a faint howl. A forlorn, lonely sound.

And there was one broken part of her that refused to heal. A piece that still expected to see Brandon Stark amongst the crowd. His voice and smile that she had known so well. The bond of blood that she shared with no other. Even though she witnessed the organs and flesh stripped from his bones with her very own eyes.

She still waited to turn around and see him standing behind her, as he always did.

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Lyra felt her jaw drop at the sight in front of her. Vaegon and Alyse were feeding chunks of raw meat to Sharra in the courtyard. The great hound snatched their hands before gently nudging the offerings into her maw of vicious teeth.

She took a step forward uncertainly. "Daemon..." she called her observing husband.

He turned to look at her. "Isn't she a beauty?"

"Can we have one too, muñā?" Vaegon asked.

Lyra raised a brow at him, then to Daemon who shrugged with feigned innocence. The last time she had seen Sharra was when the beast lovingly tore out a ravager's throat. She pinched the bridge of her nose in dismay. First dragons and now hounds, the list goes ever on. Soon they will have a menagerie of wild creatures.

"Look!" Baelor's voice cut through the frigid air. "First snow!"

His siblings gasped loudly, abandoning Sharra and running into the middle of the courtyard. Their shrill laughs echoed under the pale sun, hands outstretched to icy flakes. The children danced and scampered about with the cold winter winds against their skin.

Daemon joined them by engaging in a snowball fight. Soon, the courtyard had turned into a battlefield with shrieks and warcries. Lyra had initially watched in contentment, until Daemon flung her with a large snowball. Then she was beset by the rest of them and had to fight back.

Only the falling sun rays signalled them to a ceasefire as Daemon declared, "I yield!"

Baelor, Vaegon and Alyse jumped onto him, pushing him into a snowdrift with glee. "No mercy to the enemy!" they yelled at once, bombarding him with snow.

His screams filled the courtyard as Lyra laughed herself to the ground.

"Alright, come here," she called them, gasping for breath. "Enough tormenting your father."

The children giggled like mischievous imps and ran towards her. Their frosty hands grasped her cloak as she brushed the snow from their dampened hair. "We defeated 'kepá" they told her excitedly.

"And now you need a hot bath before you catch a cold," she told them.

Daemon clawed himself out of the drift with narrowed eyes, "Oh, have you now? Come back here, you little demons."

They shrieked and sprinted back into the safety of the castle walls where it was warm. Daemon chased after them with the intent to avenge his fallen honour. Lyra chuckled as she watched him disappear inside. She went to gather the feeding bowls left out for Sharra, herding the hound back towards her pit.

Then she heard it again. A lonely howl. It tugged on her heartstrings, like a call from the sea. Lyra turned to the smaller northern gateway of the castle, next to the gardens that bloomed with deep azure. She shivered, but not from the cold.

The lone wolf dies but the pack survives. Words whispered to her long ago that she could faintly remember.

Wrapping her cloak tightly around herself, Lyra strode through the snow-covered ground in a brisk walk. She passed the gate, ignoring the protesting guard on duty, and down the trodden dirt path.

The wolfwood stretched as far as the Wall in the deep reaches of the northern expanse. Lyra knew the woods surrounding Winterfell like the back of her hand, every evergreen and black brier within ten leagues of the castle. It had been her hunting grounds once.

Twigs snapped under her feet as she made no effort to stay silent. The howling grew louder as she advanced through the thicket. Her breaths laced heavy with anticipation. She could hear the rushing stream nearby.

Then a glimpse of fur as pure as snow caught on a breeze. The wolf was almost as tall as a bear with a thick pristine coat. Feral, proud and protective. Eyes the shade of brilliant spring stared back at her with reflected familiarity.

Lyra remembered the five other wolves in the woods. Her pack. She wondered what had happened to them, and how they had been separated. It was surely a terrible thing for a mother to be without her children.

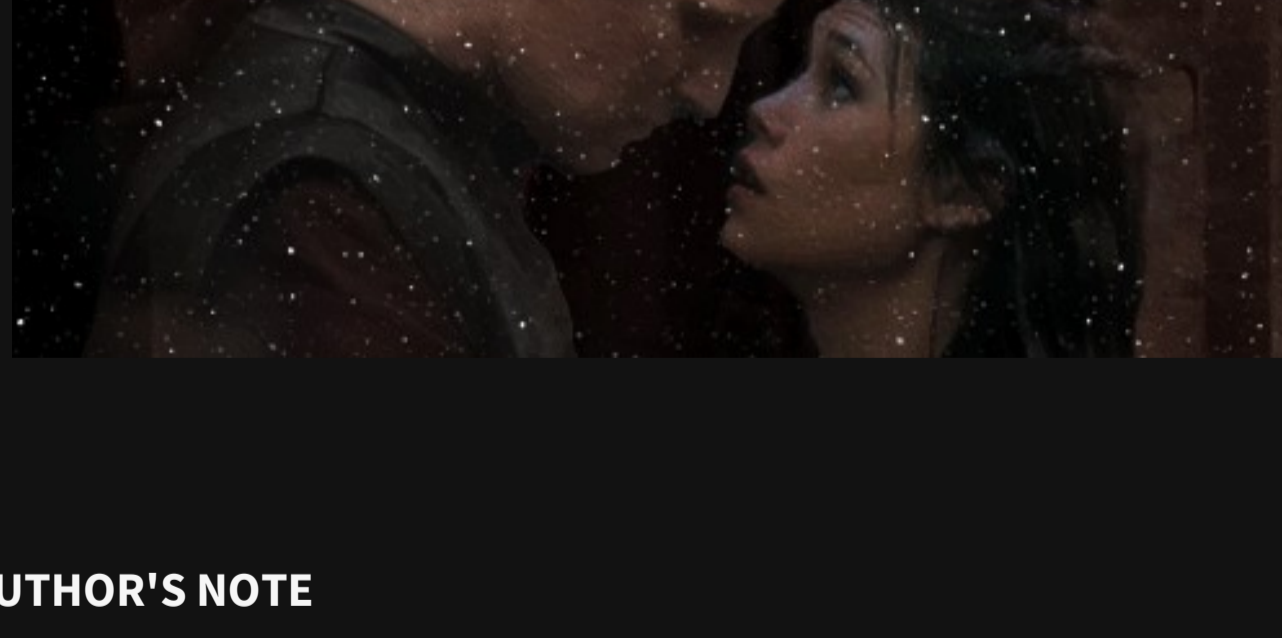
"How long have you been alone?" Lyra whispered.

The wolf continued to stare at her, eyes filled with hidden knowledge, before taking a step forward. An invitation. Lyra approached with a hand stretched out, heart quickening in her chest. Chilled fingertips met coarse fur. Her breath caught in her throat.

Time stopped, everything fading away in a fleeting vision. Lyra had only ever heard songs of winter kings in bygone ages, of wolf slaying wolf. She only ever heard stories of the Children that haunted the dead trees of the woods. Only known from tales that the blood of the First Men flowed through her veins.

Under the waning light, she gazed out and saw herself gazing back.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

did i plan on making lyra a warg? nope, not until today, but do i intend to make her the most fearsome character in this fic? yes, yes i do.

so a lot of you guys asked for a direwolf and now she has one! what should i name her? another ghost? some names i'm considering: stranger? howl? snow? sköl? garmr? hati? excited to hear your thoughts!

also a little reminder that lyra is from the north so she speaks with a northern accent and sometimes i forget, so when i remember it's like —

Continue reading next part