

Winter is here: humans rally as Night King advances on GoT S8 debut episode



Enlarge / Jon Snow (Kit Harington) brings Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) home to meet the family at Winterfell.

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Winter is here! The first episode of the hotly anticipated final season of HBO's *Game of Thrones* aired Sunday night, and it proved a solid, if not scintillating showing. There were reunions galore, a bit of sniping and tension, a nifty new opening credits sequence, and the dragons (the true stars at this point) got plenty of screen time.

(Spoilers for first seven seasons; mild spoilers for last night's episode.)

Based on George R.R. Martin's best-selling epic fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, HBO's *Game of Thrones* long ago outstripped the novels in terms of plot, although the author had some early input in shaping the TV series' broad narrative arc. We've seen plenty of sex, blood, and horrifying death over the course of seven seasons, and now it's time for the end game. This being George R.R. Martin, there's no guarantee of a happy ending.

It's a complicated show with a massive cast, even after killing off so many major characters to clear the board a bit. When we last left off, Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey) had improbably outlasted all rivals (including her own children) and ascended to the Iron Throne, with the help of her own Doctor Frankenstein, Qyburn (Anton Lesser). Her younger brother, Tyrion (Peter Dinklage), had joined forces with Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke), who also won the loyalty of Stark family bastard and new King of the North, Jon Snow (Kit Harington). Dany came to Westeros to battle Cersei for the Iron Throne, but is convinced to call a truce by Jon, who proves that the White Walkers (led by the Night King) and their undead zombies, the wights, (a) exist, and (b) are preparing to conquer Westeros and wipe out the living once and for all.

The Stark family has regained its ancestral home, Winterfell, with Sansa (Sophie Turner) in charge in Jon's absence, aided by her sister-turned-faceless-assassin Arya (Maisie Williams). Their only surviving brother, Bran (Isaac Hempstead Wright), is now a powerful seer called the Three-Eyed Raven, although his exact role in the end game is still unclear. (He spends most of his time looking dreamily solemn and occasionally makes portentous observations.) We know from earlier teasers that Dany and Jon come to Winterfell, and Sansa reluctantly cedes Winterfell to her, since Jon had "bent the knee" and

declared his loyalty to the Mother of Dragons.

- Arya Stark knows the many faces of death.
- Tormund and Beric survived the falling of the great wall of ice.
- The people of Winterfell hide and await their fate.
- Sansa sees her first dragons.
- Dragons over Winterfell are a glorious sight.
- Daenerys and Jon Snow arrive at Winterfell with her army.
- The Golden Company arrives at King's Landing
- A smirking Cersei thinks her hold on the Iron Throne will soon be secure.
- Tyrion Lannister, the Queen's Hand, ponders his next move.
- Jon Snow communes with the family weir-wood tree.
- Dany and Jon with her two remaining dragons.
- Missandei and Grey Worm share a moment alone.
- Grey Worm ready to lead the Unsullied into battle.
- Why, there's Jorah Mormont, preparing to do his part.
- Is that Gendry? We haven't seen him since, what, season 2?
- Brienne of Tarth will fight with honor.
- Prepare to meet the Night King.

Dany also lost one of her dragons to the Night King, got it on with Jon Snow, and is unaware that he is, in fact, a legitimate Targaryen by birth. (The incest here is less relevant than what this means for her claim to the throne.) In the final scene, the Night King took down the great wall of ice that has protected Westeros for centuries. So things are looking very bad for the human race indeed.

The first full trailer dropped last month, giving us brief glimpses of all the surviving characters. Everyone is basically gearing up to take on the Night King and his ice zombie hordes—everyone except Cersei, that is, whose genius

plan is to wait it out and let her enemy's forces be depleted (if not wiped out entirely). That means a whole lot of people are converging on Winterfell, starting with Jon and Dany, accompanied by her Unsullied and Dothraki armies—and remaining two dragons, of course. It's a grim homecoming for Jon in one respect, since Northerners don't trust outsiders and resent their king for bending the knee to a foreign queen and relinquishing his shiny new crown.

The emotional payoff for viewers is all the reunions that inevitably take place at Winterfell. Jon hasn't seen Bran or Arya since season 1. Arya is pleased to see Gendry (Joe Dempsie) still alive—and surprised to see her frenemy, the Hound (Rory McCann), still breathing, seeing as she last left him for dead. Tyrion hasn't seen his ex-wife Sansa since the Purple Wedding, when she fled and he wound up on trial for a murder he didn't commit. But not all the reunions are happy ones, as one might expect when former adversaries must reluctantly join forces to defeat a common threat.

As always, the dragons steal the show, and the sight of them soaring over a snowy Winterfell is glorious. "What do they eat?" Sansa snippily asks Dany, after complaining that she never expected to have to provide for so many extra mouths. "Whatever they want," Dany responds.

Game of Thrones has always had its share of placeholder episodes, where things advance incrementally and very little of major import happens. Such episodes serve a purpose in the overall narrative arc, setting up the relationships and conflicts—and just moving people from place to place—that make the big set pieces all the more powerful. This isn't quite one of them, since rather a lot happens in an episode that clocks in just under an hour. But the big fireworks are still to come with the upcoming Battle of Winterfell, rumored to be the most massive staged battle sequence of the series. We should expect to see at least some of the fan favorites fall, and fairly early in this final season. So taking the time to

relish some bittersweet reunions before all hell breaks loose
seems like a fitting opening salvo.

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