A Bastard's Journey

by Quryuu

Summary

Instead of Robb influencing Theon, the opposite occurred. Robb became more like a southern lord than a northern one and Jon felt the consequences. But a person can only take so much before enough is enough. Jon decides he'd be better off finding a new life far away from Westerns. Only he has a destiny that he cannot run from. After all, he is the song of ice and fire.

Notes

I own nothing created by G.R.R. Martin.

Just an idea that popped up and would not let go.
Jon crept from shadow to shadow trying to keep the guards from spotting him. Tonight was the night he’d finally put his plan into action and leave Winterfell. A part of him rebelled against leaving his home of ten and one years, but he could no longer take the treatment from those that should be family. True he was a bastard, and had no real claim to their home, he was lucky to have been allowed what time he had had there; however, events of the past years have finally come to head. He was finally going to give Lady Stark her fondest desire. He was going to disappear.

Life hadn’t always been bad here. When he was younger he had played often with Robb and Sansa, his half-siblings. Later it was Arya, then Bran and now Rickon who sought him out. His father, Lord Stark, loved him and Lady Stark; well she at least ignored his existence. He had learned from a very early age just what his true status was, though many thought he did not know until much older. Jon had always been very observant, something he had come to rely upon heavily. So when siblings were given warm gestures and kind words from the Lady while he received nothing but scorn, he knew he was different.

Overhearing conversations from the servants around the Keep and putting the facts together had been simple enough. Jon was a stain on the honor of House Stark and an insult to Lady Stark, in her mind at least. Most of the Northerners didn’t care that he was an illegitimate son. He had the blood of the Starks in his veins and that meant something. True, he would never inherit, unless, gods forbid, something happened to all of his siblings; but he didn’t want to inherit.

Jon saw what so many did not see when they looked at Lords and Ladies and other highborn people. He saw golden cages, where they may have had slightly more privilege, but most certainly not the freedom he could enjoy. The North was slightly less accepting than Dorne of bastards, yet far more accepting than any from south of the Neck down to the Stormlands would ever dare to be. Jon knew if he so desired he could find work and live out his life in one of the many villages in the North. His name would hinder him some, but as long as he proved himself true and honest no one would really care.

Well, no one but Lady Stark and her Southern servants. They all seemed to truly believe that children begot on unmarried couples were born evil. A truly ludicrous idea, considering how innocent all babes were when born. In fact, their own gods preached about the innocence of babes and how one must teach a child to keep them from turning down a dark path. Lady Stark clearly forgot those lessons, or mayhap simply ignored them when it came to Jon.

However, it had not been an issue until he was five years of age and his father came home from the Greyjoy Rebellion with a ward, Theon Greyjoy. At first it hadn’t been such a great change. Theon was older than him and Robb by at least three years. Slowly though, Robb started growing more and more enamored with the older boy, who in turn took the eldest Stark child under his wing. No longer did Robb spend nearly every waking minute with Jon, no longer did he share secrets or jokes with his half-brother. Instead he followed Theon around like a little duckling.

Jon had been hurt at first, of course he had. Still, he understood the novelty of a new playmate. It really hurt when Theon refused to let Jon join them due to his ‘status’ and Robb started agreeing with the other boy. Robb had never before cared that Jon was his half-brother and not his full brother. Now that seemed to change. The heir started spending less time with him and even made comments in his hearing about his status and how he should be grateful he was allowed to live with them. More and more he would make hints about Jon’s parentage, or his status and each time it felt like a stab to his heart. Then Sansa had learned what it meant for him to be their half-brother and she started to pull
away, choosing to emulate the cool distance that her mother employed. Thankfully, she didn’t add
the harsh hateful looks to her new attitude towards him. Only little Arya and his father showed him
any familial love, and he feared the day Arya would learn his status and choose to leave him too.

Other things began changing as well. Robb would make comments to his mother and suddenly Jon
was not allowed to train with Robb anymore, he instead trained with the young new recruits for the
guards. Considering the changes in his once beloved brother, he actually enjoyed these lessons more
even if they proved difficult. Due to this he could no longer take classes with Maester Luwin at the
same time as Robb, so he was only allowed a few hours of the man’s time to learn his letters and
numbers. At least the Maester recognized how intelligent Jon was and this proved a boon as they
could move far quicker through various subjects he would not have been able to with Robb in the
room. Something both kept strictly between them. The old man was not blind to see how the Lady
would react should she learn of Jon’s true mental ability.

In fact, many around the Keep would help teach him things or keep certain facts quiet, as they
watched how the Greyjoy boy influenced their young lord into ostracizing his blood brother. There
were whispers by the true Northerners how this could bring nothing good.

Other changes happened as well. His room was moved to a lower level near the servants. His clothes
were now more hand-me downs from other guards than from Robb. He wasn’t allowed to eat with
his family as often as before. When his Lord father was away checking on the Keeps of his liegeman
Jon would find himself with increased chores and even less time with Arya or Bran, after he was
born. Thankfully those two were tenacious enough to hang the rules and seek him out whenever they
could.

It was a hard life, better than many thought he deserved, but hard nonetheless. Yet he had never
thought of leaving the way he was now until his eighth year. It was during this time of his life that
Robb truly showed he no longer saw them as kin. It was then he showed his ‘southern’ colors.

Theon had intentionally caused the embarrassment of a visiting Lord’s son and then blamed Jon for
it. Jon had tried to tell them it wasn’t him. How could he have done it? He’d been in Wintertown all
day helping Old Nan with some of her errands.

None of the highborns believed him. After all he was just a bastard and Theon was the trueborn son
of a Lord. No one would speak up for him, not even those servants that knew the truth. For they
could not speak out against a highborn.

For one moment it looked like Robb would cave and tell the truth. That he wouldn’t leave his brother
by blood, half or not, to a punishment he did not deserve. Instead he chose to support to kraken and
lied to everyone, condemning Jon to a very painful punishment.

The lashes had been bad, but the disappointed look on his father’s face, counteracted by the
triumphant one on the Lady’s only made it worse. Jon had been banished to his room for two weeks
after that.

It was during that time he came to a decision. Winterfell no longer felt like home to him. It had
slowly been losing that feeling for years now. If he stayed it would only allow Robb and Theon and
Lady Stark to tear him down more, until he was nothing and had no choice but to join the Black to
salvage any honor. But Jon would not let that happen. He refused to join the Black. As much as his
father talked about it being an honor, as many stories as his Uncle Benjen told, Jon had read between
the lines. Very few men actually chose to join the Watch. More often than not the men were
criminals sent there to avoid execution. Jon did not want to live in a place where he had to constantly
watch his back from people who were supposed to be his ‘brothers’. He was getting enough of that
now. No, he would not join the Black; instead he would make his way to the free cities and try his
luck there.

Only he knew, logically he was not able to at that time. He was only eight, he didn’t have much money aside from the few coins his father gave him on his name days, all painstakingly saved and hidden. Though he was progressing in his lessons and training, he still had a ways to go before he could be ready to face the world on his own. So Jon made a plan.

For the next three years he toiled to bring his plan to fruition. He worked harder than ever in his training and studies. He took odd jobs outside of the Keep to earn some coin. Even though Theon and Robb continued to find ways to blame him for things he had nothing to do with, making him seem a liar to some in the Keep, the Northerners knew the truth. Ser Rodrick and his nephew Jory took a few times to catch on, but when they did they made sure the rest of the guards knew as well. Old Nan made sure the people of Wintertown were informed, and if Theon saw a rise in prices for his whoring, well…

Sadly the one person who should have caught on, who should have known of his heir’s unbecoming behavior was blind to it. Lord Stark was so busy trying to keep the North running and prepare for the ever-coming Winter that he missed the change in dynamics of his family. He did not see that there was a line slowly being drawn between his youngest children and his oldest. For Arya and Bran were still firmly in Jon’s camp despite Lady Stark’s attempts otherwise.

The worst part of this was the small folk did notice. Jon sometimes heard whispers of discontent of how southern Robb and Sansa were becoming, no doubt because of their mother. Yet they praised how Arya and Bran were true wolves of the north. As much as his father wanted to ignore it, the North would not settle for the southern ways his wife subtly pushed. Jon really hoped with his disappearance maybe these whispers would taper off, and his family could continue in peace. After all, surely the only reason their southern tendencies were showing so much was because Jon was there.

He would miss his little sister Arya and his little brothers Bran and Rickon, though the latter was young enough to forget him easily. He would miss many of the people he had grown to respect over time. And he would miss his father, a man who loved him as much as he could, given the circumstances. He would even miss Winterfell, the old Keep having served as a home for the last ten and one years of his life. A place seeped with the history of his kin.

He didn’t think he would miss Robb, Sansa or Lady Stark, though he could admit he might miss the idea of them.

Still he could not turn back now. He’d finally earned enough coin, gathered together enough supplies and even stumbled upon information about ships in White Harbor looking for crew, including cabin boys. This was the time to act.

As if the gods themselves were on his side, Lord Stark had been called away to oversee a dispute between two of his banner men. He had even seen fit to take Robb and Theon with him, both gloating as much as possible when Jon was around. Jon had learned to ignore them both by focusing on his plan in his mind. It certainly made living here the last three years more bearable.

He had waited until the hour of the wolf knowing if he left this night, the same as Lord Starks’ departure, everyone would think he snuck off to join his party, should they even discover his disappearance. Instead he will be headed in the opposite direction.

The only problem was his original route seemed to have more guards than normal. As such he had to actually cut through the crypt yard. Not a joyous prospect. Ever since he was younger he’d had dreams that he was in the crypts, walking down deep into the resting place of the Kings and Lords of Winter. Their statutes would stare down at him in disapproval, before they sprang to live, hovering
over him, telling him how he did not belong there. He would cry out apologies and try to run away, more often waking up in a cold sweat before he reached the exit.

Those dreams were just another reminder that he was not a Stark, even if he shared their blood. He did not belong in Winterfell.

Sadly, his only option to avoid being seen at that moment was to duck into the crypts. Why were the guards being so vigilant tonight? Was it because it was the first night Lord Stark was away? Surely not.

Pressing an ear to the door he hear voices murmuring close by. From the sounds of it they would not be going anytime soon. Wonderful.

Jon huffed in irritation, placing his travel sack down for a moment. He had to stay calm; he couldn’t let this little hiccup ruin his plan. He’d just wait for them to move on and all would be well.

When another minute passed and the voices continued to show no indication of leaving Jon let out a sigh. Turning around he let his back lean against the large weir wood carved door, his mind wandering slightly. His eyes kept flickering to the steps leading down to the main tombs. Perhaps… perhaps he should pay his respects one last time? His grandfather was buried there, as were his aunt and uncle and countless other ancestors. True he was a bastard, but they were his family and he likely would never be back again.

A feeling in his gut told him this was the right thing to do, just like the times he knew when he needed to go pray in the Gods Wood. So he pulled one of the ever-lit torches at the front of the hall and made his way down the spiral staircase to the first of the tombs.

With the light from the torch he came upon his Uncle Brandon’s tomb first. His statue showed a strong man in the prime of his life. It was a shame his father never spoke of him much, then again he disliked speaking of that time, when so many Starks died. Next he moved to his Aunt Lyanna’s tomb. He always felt exceptionally sad when he saw her statue, as if his heart was crying out for her. Probably because he truly sympathized with her. He had heard her story from Maester Luwin, or at least the official version. But from what bits he heard about his aunt from Old Nan and Uncle Benjen, she was a lot like Arya. A free spirit that refused to be tied down, and have her freedom taken. Jon had serious doubts that she was ‘kidnapped’. Likely she found a way to flee her betrothal and took it. From some of the things he had heard about her betroth, King Robert, he can’t say he blamed her. It was just a shame it ended in such disaster.

He turned then to the largest of these three statues, his grandfather, Lord Rickard Stark. His figure sat with sword over his lap just like all the other Lords and Kings of Winter. At his side was a large direwolf, based mostly on the statues already in the crypt. No one had seen an actual direwolf in centuries, not south of the Wall.

The facial features were set in a stern look, not quite a frown but almost. His father had once remarked this was his father’s normal face, as Lord Rickard seemed to rarely smile. Jon thought that was sad, as his father, Eddard, also rarely smiled. Maybe he was trying to be like his father, southern alliances and all.

“I’m leaving,” he spoke suddenly, surprising himself with his sudden need to explain his reasons to someone. Even if they were dead. “I know many will think it cravenly. Yet, I cannot fathom staying another day here. I tried for so long to hold on, to keep going for those members of my family that love me unconditionally. But it’s become too much. I can’t stay here and let them turn me into something I am not.” A small self-deprecating smirk curled his lip. “I guess this is what everyone wanted anyway. I’m a stain on House Stark, but I won’t be any more.”
“You are not a stain on our house.”

Jon froze, fear clenching his stomach. His father was here? He had come back? How? Slowly he turned ready to face the man he had loved and looked up to all his life, ready for the disappointment and anger at learning his bastard son was running away. Only it was not his father he found waiting for him.

It was Lord Rickard Stark.
Jon blinked, then blinked again. Nope, that was still a glowing, ethereal looking Rickard Stark standing in front of him. By the gods, was his dream coming to life? Was he here to personally throw Jon out of Winterfell?

“Not going to faint on me, are you boy,” the ghost asked dryly.

Jon felt his ire rise at that. He wasn’t afraid of some ghost in a crypt. “I won’t faint,” he snapped out, glaring slightly at his spectral grandparent only to earn a laugh instead.

“There’s that wolf spirit,” he chuckled happily. “I was afraid you’d lost it. I’m glad to see you haven’t as you will need that spirit to see you through the times to come.”

“Milord?” Jon was confused now, what was this ghost talking about? Was he a ghost or had Jon fallen asleep?

“It’s grandfather to you pup,” the man corrected. “You may not have my name, but you have my blood flowing in your veins.” He leaned over slightly so that he was looking Jon in the eye. “There is a reason our family has ruled the North for over eight thousand years. Stark blood is strong and even without our name, you would command respect from true Northerners for having it.”

“I used to think so,” Jon muttered tiredly, shoulders slumping. “But I do not know if it is true anymore. These last few years… I… They…”

“Aye, I know,” he finished for the child, eyes sad and angry at the same time. “Some of that is my fault. I never should have sent Ned south to foster, nor should I have been so adamant to make alliances with southern houses. I just thought to leave more to my children… but now… now it’s not how it was supposed to be.”

“You couldn’t have known what was going to happen,” Jon offered quietly, trying to give him some comfort. How strange he was comforting a ghost?

Rickard offered him a tight smile. “True, but perhaps if I had listened more to my children I could have saved them from their futures.”

“Old Nan says some things are just meant to be,” Jon countered. “Some things are written in destiny and cannot be changed.”

“But some things are not,” Rickard noted slyly. “Such as a base born son leaving to find his own way in the world.”

Jon looked away from him, slightly ashamed. “I don’t belong here…”

“You do,” Rickard stated assuredly. “You carry Stark blood, so you will always be welcome in Winterfell and the North.”

“But the dreams,” Jon started then trailed off.

“Where you are here in the crypts going ever deeper and the lords of winter rise up and chase you out,” Rickard finished for him, kneeling before the boy. Jon stared at him in disbelief. How had he known? “Jon, Stark blood is the blood of the First Men and the Children of the Forest. This means our blood has magic in it. Dreams are not simply dreams for us. Some of our family even carries the
green sight Old Nan has told you about. But you Jon, your blood holds more magic than the rest of
the Starks, and that is due to your other parent.” Jon started to ask about his mother only for Rickard
to cut him off. “I am sorry but I cannot tell you more about them. That is something you will learn in
time. I can tell you that both of your parents were good honorable people, and you should never be
ashamed of them.” Jon nodded in understanding, though part of him was actually still confused.

“You, Jon, combine the blood of two great houses,” Rickard continued. “Because of this when you
dream you sometimes travel farther than you should. Those dreams you had about the crypts were
really your soul taking walks in the land between the living and the dead.”

Jon paled horrifically. “So when they said I didn’t belong…”

“They meant in the land of the dead,” the other responded promptly. “Sometimes your soul walked
too close, so our ancestors had to push you back to the land of the living. Never once did they mean
you did not belong with our family. If anything you may be the only one able to save it.”

“What do you mean? There are no enemies to our family,” Jon asked, before amending slightly. “At
the moment… Unless, you think the small folk might rise up?” Jon chewed his lip worriedly. “I
know they’re not happy with how southern Robb and Sansa are, but surely they will prove
themselves true northerners when they are older? Surely the people love our family too much to harm
them…”

“It is not the small folk I worry over,” Rickard assured him, privately pleased that the boy still had
some concern for Ned’s two oldest children, even if they have not earned it. “As you have said there
are no enemies yet. However, one day Ned will go south and as history has taught us, Starks never
do well in the south. They will need you to save them if possible. For that is what family does, even
when we do not agree or like other members of our pack. We protect each other in our times of
need.”

Jon’s shoulder’s slumped again. “So, I should stay… to watch over them and protect them?” It was a
very depressing thought. While he would do so if his grandfather asked, he had his hopes set on
finding a new life in the east.

“Normally I would say yes,” Rickard told him honestly. “For the lone wolf dies while the pack
survive.” It was a saying Jon had heard often. “But, the pack is not healthy right now, and if you
stayed it would only get worse. While I don’t like the thought of any of my grandchildren alone in
the world, you need this chance to find your true strength and allies. And our family needs this to
learn some very hard truths. Winter is coming Jon, and it brings with it a threat that has not been seen
in some time. If the North and our family is to survive, they will need you to be the best warrior you
can be.”

Frowning Jon pondered just what he meant, only to realize it a second later. “You speak of the
Others? Beyond the Wall? But were they not destroyed?”

“They were defeated,” Rickard informed him stoically, though he had a look of pride for Jon’s quick
mind. “However, they still exist. It has taken time for them to gather their strength to try another
assault. It will be some years yet before it begins. So you little wolf need to learn all you can. Learn
so that you can save your family and our world when the time comes.”

“Shouldn’t I tell father about this?” It made the most sense to Jon, his father was the Warden of the
North.

Rickard shook his head sadly. “Ned has lost belief in the old tales. His time south has made him
think they are just fables. He would need actual proof before he could even begin to consider it true.
And…” He hesitated slightly.

“No one would believe the word of a bastard,” Jon finished for him tiredly. It was a lesson he had learned well these past years. “Can I say that I find a person’s character being judged on the circumstances of their birth is the most asinine thing ever? Honor and morality are not contingent on someone’s status in life. They hinge on the actual person and their choices.”

“Aye, you speak the truth of it,” Rickard agreed, wishing once again that things had gone differently when he was alive. If only Lyanna had told him… “In the past, in the North, that was the way of it. But much changes, especially when those in power want to keep their power, and know the only way to do so is to make others see things their way. Maybe one day, you will show them a better way.”

Nodding in thought Jon considered this, but was unsure it would ever come true. “Maybe,” he murmured softly.

“It’s time for you to go little wolf,” Rickard informed him suddenly. “Just remember that you carry the Stark blood, you are of the North and that means something. Try not to start fights, but if you get in one, finish it. And always remember our words.”

“Winter is coming,” Jon replied dutifully.

“Good lad,” his grandfather praised gruffly. “Now off with ya, you’re adventure won’t start on its own.”

Before Jon could respond the ghost of Rickard Stark flickered out, leaving the boy alone in the torch lit crypt. Allowing his eyes to drift to the statues of his kin one last time, Jon turned on his heal and made his way up the stairs. He had a plan to implement and a journey to start.
Eddard ‘Ned’ Stark was pleased to see the walls of Winterfell at long last. The past weeks of travel and dealing with a dispute between two of his lords had been very trying. Not from the travel or even the dispute between the lords, mainly because it was an old spat that would likely not be resolved even in the lifetime of his grandchildren, but due to the behavior of his heir and his ward.

When he had first brought the Greyjoy boy home as his ward he had hoped he would fit in and learn a different way of life. The ways of his people had led to bloodshed and much loss. Surely if Ned showed him a better way he would take it. So he was pleased when his son grew a friendship with the boy. It had worried him that Jon had not followed Robb in such, but he figured it would do well for them to have different friends. Catelyn had not been thrilled at the addition, but she accepted it dutifully and started allowing the boy to join their family dinners. Slowly the Greyjoy heir had become engrained in their pack, and he was pleased that Robb was a good influence on the boy. The only downside was that Jon seemed to be pulling away more and more, with Robb spending most of his time with the Greyjoy heir. However, Ned figured they had different interests and Catelyn said it was good for them to have time apart. So he had shrugged off his misgivings and life went on.

These past weeks though, he had seen that it was not Robb who held the influence but Theon, and not in a good way. Robb showed less concern and consideration for those who served them, much like Theon, who tended to act like everyone was beneath him. He seemed to speak more arrogantly than before, something Ned had taught him never to do. His son had neither the experience nor the skill to back up his words, yet he still acted like he did, again much like Theon. He was even showing a rather alarming amount of attention to women, though Ned knew the boy couldn’t be anywhere near ready for such thoughts. But Theon was, having three years on Robb. The boy had already begun frequenting the brothels in Wintertown according to the guards. Ned didn’t approve, but Theon was only his ward, so he could not forbid him from seeking his pleasure. He would, however put his foot down if the boy tried to drag his son into it.

What really alarmed Ned, was Robb’s attitude around his banner men. These men and/or their sons would one day answer to Robb, and Robb would be in charge of looking out for them. Yet he treated them with borderline disrespect, something Ned would not tolerate. In fact, he had decided to send Robb away from the meeting then have him possibly cause more issues. That Robb didn’t seem at all bothered by the dismissal was also worrying. He should know that to be sent away from such a meeting would have him seen as lesser in the eyes of his men, and the threat of it alone should have curbed his behavior. Instead he seemed to think Ned had done him a favor. He had even asked Ned why he bothered to come personally to treat with his lords when he could have simply sent them an order from Winterfell.

This was not the behavior of a Northern Heir and Lord to be. No, his son was acting like a spoiled southerner, with alarmingly Iron Born tendencies.

Something needed to be changed. Robb was losing the respect of the men and women who served him, which would not be good. A Lord Paramount who was not respected by his people, was one who often found himself replaced, usually by force. He knew he would need to think about what he would need to do, but for the time being he kept the boys separate by giving them various duties during the trip. Perhaps he could make it so Jon and Robb spent more time together and they could rebuild the friendship they had once shared. Hopefully that would also curb Jon’s strange predilection for getting into trouble these last few years.

Ned just couldn’t understand it. Jon was so quiet and respectful; he had never caused much trouble,
preferring to stay out of the way. But since he turned eight he seems to be getting up to more mischief than not. Catelyn couldn’t be counted on to be objective where Jon was concerned since she was still insulted he had allowed a bastard to be raised with his trueborn children. Everyone else he asked just gave him strange looks, telling him that Jon was a good boy and perhaps he should look elsewhere, which only confused him.

Granted, he found it strange that Jon was doing the things he was getting in trouble for, but no one ever came forward to say otherwise, and Robb wouldn’t lie. He had taught him better… then again maybe there was something he was missing. Had these past weeks not shown him that Robb was not implementing the lessons he had taught him? He would need to have a talk with Jon once he was home.

Soon enough the main gate was in sight and the men on the wall were calling to the rest about their return, the gate opening to welcome them. Like every other time he’d returned after time away, he felt warm at the thought of finally being home. No matter where he went, for whatever length of time Winterfell would be his true home.

Already he could make out Catelyn waiting for him, with Sansa to one side and their other three children to the other side. Rodrick and Jory were there as well as Maester Luwin; no doubt the old man had an armload of letters for him to look over from his absence. He could see the adults checking over their party, likely making sure there were no injuries. While always a possibility, he had doubted they would run into any troubles on this trip, which is why he took Robb in the first place.

Dismounting he went to his wife first, greeting her with a kiss. She seemed a bit anxious, but it was no doubt due to her eagerness to greet their firstborn. This was the first time he’d been away for so long. So he turned to Sansa, greeting her with a hug and a kiss to her head, marveling at his little beauty. She smiled up at him happily, returning his embrace.

When he moved to greet his other three children he realized there was a problem. Arya and Bran were searching all of the men who traveled with him, their eyes combing over them hastily, not finding whatever they were hoping for. Rickon stood next to them, clutching onto Arya’s frock, little face scrunched into a frown. Seeming to sense his father the tiny three year old looked up to him with big blue eyes, welling with tears.

“Jawn?” His bottom lip wobbled uncertainly for a moment.

Ned pulled his youngest into his arms, lifting him up. “You are looking for Jon? Is he not here?” Now that he too looked he could not find his nep… SON, he could not find his son. “Is he completing some chores? Or did he go out for a ride?”

“He’s not with you,” Arya’s slightly shrill voice accused. He found her and Bran looking at him in shocked despair.

“Why would Jon be with me,” he asked, honestly confused. “He was to stay here.”

Ned turned to Catelyn who refused to meet his gaze, instead seemed to focus on fussing over Robb. Sansa didn’t seem to be privy to the conversation, too busy chatting with her friend Jeyne Poole. It was his Maester and Master-at-Arms that had him worried. Both men looked more than a little upset and exceptionally despondent.

“Maester Luwin, Ser Rodrick,” he addressed the two in his Lord voice, gaining the attention of all in the yard. “Can you tell me why my youngest children thought Jon was with my party, when I clearly left him here instead?”
Both men shared a confused glance before Luwin stepped forward. “It was discovered that young Jon went missing the day after you left. We have searched all through Winterfell and the town without finding him. It was suggested he followed after your party in secret, so we sent that missive to you, my Lord. When we did not get a response we assumed he was indeed with you.”

Ned felt a chill settle in the pit of his stomach. Jon was missing? Had been since the day after he left? That was near three weeks! He was but a boy of ten and one! He wouldn’t be able to survive on his own!

“What missive do you speak of,” he demanded once he got past the lump in his throat. “I never received any such missives.”

“Are you speaking about that ridiculous note about the bastard,” Robb piped in. Ned stared at his son in disbelief at the way he referred to his kin. Jon and Robb had been raised as brothers. Robb had always declared that Jon would be a brother to him as they shared blood, just like a true northerner should. When had that changed? “I didn’t think it important enough to disturb you with, father. He’s obviously off sulking somewhere and trying to get attention.”

“Your brother is missing,” Ned stated slowly, trying very hard to hold in his temper. He vaguely noted some of the men shifting away from him. His son didn’t realize the danger he was in, but those that knew the Quiet Wolf, knew he was about to show true rage. “Long enough that my Maester deemed it necessary to send a missive, to me. Jon, while not a Stark by name, shares our blood. He could be hurt, or in trouble and you didn’t think it important for me to know something was amiss with him?”

“What does it matter if something does happen to him,” Robb scoffed, clearly not in the least bothered by the thought one of his kin could be in danger. “Bastards are worthless. It’s not like he’d ever amount to much. The best he could have hoped for was to join the Watch, and die. It’s not like you need him in any case. I have lived past childhood, and mother kindly produced two extra sons even if only one was needed, along with two daughters to barter for alliances. You should have gotten rid of him ages ago. Really, it’s a blessing that he’s no longer here to stain the honor of our house.”

Ned stared at his son with a blank face. Was this really his child? Were these words coming out of his mouth? Even Catelyn was looking at him as if she could not understand his words, so obviously she hadn’t been the one putting such notions in his head. Or should he clarify she didn’t put the notion about his other siblings in his head, as for Jon, it was quite possible and she likely agreed with the sentiments. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the Greyjoy heir nodding in agreement, that sly annoying smirk painting his face.

“JON IS NOT A STAIN ON OUR HOUSE,” Arya screeched at her brother, breaking the stunned silence. “HE IS OUR BROTHER! HE CARRIES THE BLOOD OF THE STARKS! HE HAS MORE HONOR IN HIS LITTLE FINGER THAN YOU DO IN YOUR ENTIRE BODY!!!

“Please,” Robb sneered down at the girl. “I am a trueborn heir to a Lordship. I am automatically better than that bastard could hope to be. What is your Septa teaching you?”

“You are a liar,” Bran stated softly, yet it was still heard by many. Ned stared at his soft-spoken child surprised the quiet child had spoken up, before turning to Robb, seeing his face twist in a horrid rage. “You constantly lay the blame at Jon’s feet for things you and Theon have done. Because you know no one can say anything against you because you’re highborns and Jon is not. You mostly do it when father is gone, because mother doesn’t question other people like he does. You know she’ll believe whatever you say because she thinks all bastards are not to be trusted, especially Jon. You’re a craven hiding behind mother’s dislike of Jon.”
Ned froze, his eyes catching his wife’s. Again she had to look away from him. How could this have happened? When Catelyn had told him of the trouble Jon caused, mostly when he was away as Bran stated, he assumed she had done as he would have and questioned everyone involved. Had she really let her anger at his lie about Jon being his bastard turn her eyes from finding the truth? Would she really be that petty?

“What proof do you have,” Robb challenged.

“You said Jon was the one who let the pigs out three moons ago,” Arya chimed in angrily. “But how could he do that when he spent the whole day working in the town? He was helping with the roof repairs for the orphanage. I know because I followed him and played with some of the children. But he made me go home in the afternoon so I wouldn’t worry mother or Septa Mordane for being gone too long. But he wasn’t able to return until just before dinner, which he was forbidden from having as punishment for something you did.”

Robb opened his mouth to argue but Bran cut him off. “He didn’t start that fire that caused smoke damage to the library. Jon has been working at the stables in Wintertown to earn extra coin. He was there the afternoon of the fire. I watched him leave from my perch on the outer wall. I was still there when he came back four hours later, and he scolded me for staying in such high places and worrying our parents. He suffered ten lashes for a crime he could not have committed, since he was in town a good hour before it occurred.”

Robb growled low and started again to defend himself when a surprising defender of Jon spoke up.

“Theon was the one to harass the kitchen maids, going so far as to strike one. Yet when mother asked, Robb pointed to Jon and he was punished without the maids even being spoken to. I overheard a maid crying about it and begging to be reassigned. She was so afraid of what Theon would do to her, since Lord Robb was protecting him.”

“Sansa,” Robb bellowed angrily at the girl. “Proper ladies are supposed to keep their mouths shut!”

“And according to you, proper ladies are just things to be used as bargaining chips,” she hissed at her older brother with righteous fury. “While I am aware that any marriage I have may benefit our family, and it is my duty, I am still a Stark. It is the duty of my family to make sure whoever I marry is also a good man. You are my brother, yet you talk as if you would sell me off to whoever gave you the best deal.”

“As if you would care, as long as you had your fancy dresses and pretty baubles,” he snapped back. “And since when do you care about family?”

“I have always cared about family,” she argued back demurely, though her eyes flashed with rage. Clearly she was trying to retain her lady-like manners, when she really wanted to gouge her brother’s eyes out. “As Starks we are wolves in a pack, and mother’s words are Family, Duty, Honor. Both houses we come from push the importance of family; that we must look out for each other.”

Robb snorted derisively. “Please, Jon shares our blood, so he would be ‘family’ yet you treat him as poorly as mother does. So surely those words don’t mean much.”

“Robb,” Catelyn gasped in shock at her firstborn’s harsh words. Never had she heard her son speak in such a manner. Why was he acting like this? He had a good education; she and Ned had raised him properly… So why?

“It’s true,” he pointed out flippantly. “You always say family is important, even those by marriage, yet Jon is family to you by marriage and you treat him worse than a beggar. Granted as a bastard
that’s more than he deserves, but, as I am trying to point out to Sansa, family only goes so far. Really you should be thankful you were born as a lady so you can have the opportunity to marry into a good house, and further our power. Besides it’s not like I’ll marry you to some low lord with no wealth. What do you care if he’s a ‘good’ man as long as you’re taken care of?”

Ned had had enough. Not only was Robb treating the idea of someone sharing his blood as a mere coincidence, but also he was dismissing the importance of the bonds of family, trueborn or otherwise. He had seen such attitudes in the south and he detested them, right up there with rapists and murderers. These types of men had no honor, just a sense of entitlement that was misplaced. Being a lord was not a right or a privilege. It was a duty, pure and simple. He did not want to implement the punishment he had in mind, but Robb had gone too far. This was not just a phase, the boy truly believed his words.

Calmly he handed Rickon to his wife, who stood by just as shocked as the rest of them. He motioned his other children to remain quiet as he faced his heir, no longer Ned Stark, father, but as Lord Paramount of the North.

“Enough,” he demanded quietly. He didn’t need to raise his voice as it lashed out like a crack silencing everyone immediately. He stared at Robb, taking note of the rather rebellious look his son held. “Is what they say true? Did you lie time and time again, placing blame on your brother, Jon, for things you or Theon did?”

“They have no proof for what they said. I don’t see how this matters,” Robb hedged. “He’s just a bastard…”

“Answer the question,” Ned growled, shocking his son with his show of anger. Sadly the child had no idea what he was truly in for.

Robb tried to stand up to his father, tried to find it in himself to continue placing the blame at Jon’s feet to keep him out of trouble. However, standing here looking into his father’s ice cold gray eyes, he knew he could utter nothing but the truth.

“Aye,” he muttered halfheartedly. His mother gasped in shock, and Theon uttered some curses, but perhaps the worst response was the silence that came from the rest of the yard. He chanced a glance around to those that stood by watching, only to see the knowing unsurprised looks. That perhaps more than anything startled him. He had thought no one had known of his lies, after all, his father hadn’t and his mother always believed him. Instead he was finding himself very misinformed, even worse, those around them looked at him with contempt and disappointment.

Still even those looks were better that the one his father was giving him right now. No, not his father, this was the Lord of Winterfell standing before him.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” The question was calm, belying the raging emotions inside.

“I was just being a good highborn like Theon…”

“You are not Theon,” Ned barked viciously, cutting the boy off. “You are Robb Stark! You are a northerner, not some southern boy who’s lucky to be alive and remains so purely by my choosing.” Robb stepped back, shrinking under his father’s gaze. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Theon flinching as well, face pale.

“You purposely blamed an innocent for your own crimes, you manipulated it so one of your blood would be punished unjustly simply because you thought it was your right as a highborn.” Ned let the
words hang in the air like a statement, not a question. “Further, you have taken to acting like an arrogant fool, who would willingly throw away family and the trust of our people because you feel you are entitled like a spoiled southern heir.”

Catelyn and Sansa stared at the Lord in disbelief, having never heard him speak of the south in such a manner. Both wanted to protest his using the word southern as if it were bad, however, each of them saw the looks of the northerners still watching this scene, and clearly saw how they agreed with Lord Stark. It was a very sobering realization that so many looked down on the behaviors and beliefs they followed daily.

“In the North, family, blood means more than anything or anyone else. Whether legitimate or not, if a child has the blood of a northern house, they are cared for by that house and are treated as the family they are. To do anything else, to purposely cause them harm, is considered as offensive as kin slaying by our people,” Lord Stark informed his gaping son coldly. “While I cannot change how my southern wife perceives bastards, I had thought I taught my children, my northern children, the true value of blood the way true northerners see it. Sadly my two eldest true born cannot see past sly words of southern hostages or storybook tales and songs that have no place in real life. Worse, my heir, the heir to the North, holds no value to any of his family it seems.” One could hear a pin drop, the silence was so thick in the courtyard. “I may have been fostered in the south, and I may have allowed more southern teachings than many would for their northern children, but I am the Warden of the North, and you are northerners as well. So it is time you learn the way a true northerner, who has done what you have done, learns.”

“My lord,” Catelyn tried to speak up, worried for her first born, but a sharp look silenced any protest. Ned was beyond enraged. Catelyn had never seen him this angry before, not even during the multiple times she harassed him about Snow. The worst part was she could not blame him. Her son, her precious Robb had spat on the one thing that neither of them would allow. He had disrespected the bonds of family, and he had disrespected unspoken rules of the North. Even Catelyn was not foolish enough to think this transgression could go unpunished. She may get away with many things as a southern lady, whose northern lord indulges her, but as the heir to the North, Robb would not be given that luxury.

“From this day forth, until you prove yourself worthy, you shall no longer wear the name Stark or the title of my heir,” Lord Stark spoke with a finality that no one dared to question. “You will be Robb Snow, a bastard son of this family. You will be treated with the same courtesy all bastards receive, and none that a lord’s son would. You will live in a room similar to what Jon had. You will perform tasks and chores the same as any bastard or baseborn would have. You will receive the education I have allowed Jon to receive, for you are of my blood and I take care of those that are mine. Be grateful you live in the north where being a bastard is not as condemning as it would be in the south.” He let his words sink into the boy’s head, watching as the realization of what was said finally hit him. Before the child could protest he continued. “You are my son and I love you, but you are a northerner, and such behavior will not be tolerated. If you cannot change your ways and prove yourself to be worthy of the Stark name, you will remain a Snow, and the title of heir will pass to my next oldest son. I suggest you think long and hard during your punishment over the things you have done and the way you have wronged, not only your family, but the people of the North.”

Having nothing else to say he turned on his heel and moved towards the main Keep. “Rodrick, Maester, meet me in my solar, we must discuss the search efforts.”

As they watched the Lord of the North walk away with some of his men following, the rest of the small folk dispersed leaving only the family behind. Even Theon had slinked off, for once trying to keep a low profile.
Robb turned to his mother in shock. “He can’t do that… can he?”

“Yes, he can,” Catelyn informed her son flatly.

“But surely you can talk…”

“I will not,” she cut him off. Letting her own disappointment through she gazed at her eldest child. “You have gone too far. You have lied, repeatedly. You have shown you hold no respect for your father or for me, and you have shown little regard for your family. These are not the things we have taught you. This is not the behavior of a noble heir to a great house. While I wish there was another punishment your father could have chosen, he has made his decision clear. You must bare the consequences of your actions. I pray you will be able to overcome this obstacle and prove yourself to be a Stark.”

Sweeping Rickon up she also made her way back to the keep, trying to calm her racing thoughts. Sansa followed in her wake, throwing one last look at her brother. Robb stood there in disbelief, as he watched them disappear.

“You are my brother, so I will always love you, ‘cause you’re family.” Arya’s words caught his attention and he turned to find her and Bran standing before him, both looking angry. “But I really don’t like you right now. And I won’t forgive you for making Jon leave.”

“I didn’t make…” he tried to argue back, voice weaker in conviction that before.

“Didn’t you,” Bran countered, far more calmly than Arya, but still holding an undertone of fury. “After the way you treated him the last three years? I’m surprised he didn’t leave sooner, if it meant escaping you, mother and Theon.”

Robb wanted to argue, he wanted to say something, anything to absolve himself. But the two simply walked away from him, not even looking back.

The former heir of the Stark house stood there in shock, wondering how everything had fallen apart.
Ten days had passed and nothing. No sign had been found of Jon, nor had any word come from any of the houses in the north. The missives had been sent after a quick conference with his Maester, and all of his lords should have received them by now. He had also coordinated with Rodrick to send a search party in each direction from the Keep to see if they could pick up Jon’s trail, however, nothing was found. In some ways this was good, as there was no proof anything nefarious had happened to the boy. But it also didn’t give Ned any hope otherwise.

To say the whole Keep was tense would be an understatement. An invisible battle line had been drawn between the northern and southern servants. The northerners were eager for Jon to be found and returned, they also felt Robb had received a just punishment for the things he had done. The southerners believed no one should care that much for a bastard child, and were appalled he would punish Robb at all. Needless to say the different factions were not working well together.

That didn’t concern him nearly as much as the attitudes of his family.

Catelyn was acting coldly towards him, much as she had when he first brought Jon home. However, this time he was returning the favor. He had thought she had come to respect the north and their beliefs, but he was wrong. He also couldn’t fully forgive her for dealing out punishment without fully finding the truth. It was dishonorable and petty, something he thought his wife was above. No she had not liked that Jon lived there, no she had not acted as a mother to him, but he had thought she had accepted that Jon was his family and would treat him fairly, if not kindly. Having proof to the contrary only showed how little he truly knew his wife.

Then there were the children. Arya, Bran and even little Rickon were wroth with the loss of Jon. The boy had been a companion they could turn to when their parents were busy, as Sansa preferred time with Jeyne and Robb thought himself too good to look after his siblings. He had learned that Jon would play with them, read them stories or help them with their lessons. He had acted as a true older brother should and Ned found himself immensely proud of the boy. Yet at the same time hurt that the child did not think to come to him to tell his version of events, or ask for his help. Something he noted his younger children were immolating, now that he was aware of it. Had he not shown his children he would always listen to them? He would always try to be there for them and give them advice? Had he failed so badly as a father?

He didn’t know what he could do to remedy the situation. He only hoped if… no when they found Jon he could change this.

As for his eldest children…

Sansa was continuing on as normal, not seemingly affected by the drama. Yet, even he noted her trying to act a bit more northern, or spend a little more time with her siblings. Something the younger ones did not make all that easy, though they were infinitely nicer to Sansa than to Robb.

Robb… Robb was having a hard time of it. He had been moved down to the room next to Jon’s, as Ned refused to let anyone take over that room, still hoping to bring the boy home. To say he was shocked at how small and cramped it was compared to his own room was an understatement. His face when presented with the clothing Jon often had to wear even more so. The boy had adopted a rather sullen attitude, often defiant, though it was quickly wiped away with a well-timed comparison to Jon. Rodrick and Maester Luwin were the two to most often use this tactic, both having been closer to Jon than even Ned knew. Granted most of the servants were still slightly differential, as they knew he could one day be their lord again, so the punishment was not nearly as bad as it could be.
Likely the biggest change for the child was Greyjoy’s treatment of him. Gone was the friendly Iron Born, who catered to Robb’s whims or tried to impress the young lordling. No, the kraken had shown his true colors and started to treat Robb as poorly as he treated Jon. Theon only cared about himself, and had only really befriended Robb because he would be the next Lord of Winterfell. Now that he was a ‘Snow’, there was no point in staying friends.

Ned had no doubt that it was an eye opening experience for his eldest, especially as no one else showed any true surprise over the Iron Born’s change in behavior.

Still, this is not what he had wanted for his family. Each day with no news about Jon only made it worse. His own temper had shown more than once over the subject, until he either secluded himself in his solar or the Gods Wood.

This evening though he decided to get lost in his cups, something he rarely ever did. When he was younger he didn’t indulge because it wasn’t really in his nature and when he was older it was because Catelyn didn’t like him coming to bed in such a state. Considering they were not sharing a room at the moment, and he doubted they would any time in the near future, he decided he was well within his rights to get completely drunk.

Normally if he drank too much he’d fall asleep, but tonight he was too restless for that. So grabbing his wineskin he made his way outside, hoping the night air would clear some of the dark thoughts running through his head. With stumbling steps he navigated around the Keep, most of the denizens having gone to bed hours ago. A few guards passed him by, but knew better than to say anything to him, simply nodding and moving on.

Surprisingly he found himself at the crypts. Usually in his wanderings he found his way to the Gods Wood, but perhaps he needed to find solace with his family.

It didn’t take him long to get to the portion of the crypts that held his father, brother and sister, though later he would seriously wonder how he didn’t fall and break his neck in his state. But at the moment, all he could do was stare at Lyanna’s statue.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, shoulders dropping in despair. “I promised to protect him. I promised to watch over him and I failed. I didn’t see how his own kin were treating him. I didn’t see how unhappy he was. I thought I had been doing right by him. I knew making him a bastard would give him a hard life, but I figured it was better than having him killed. And here in the North he could have found a life for himself. He could have…” He trailed off, a lone tear falling down his cheek. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t cut out for all of this. I’m just the second son. I wasn’t meant to be Lord of Winterfell. I keep screwing everything up!”

Suddenly anger over took him and he whirled to face the statue of his brother.

“You! It was supposed to be you,” he yelled at the figure. “You were the one taught how to rule! You were the one raised in the north! I was just supposed to marry someone and settle down with a small hold and be one of your banner men! Why did you have to run off to King’s Landing? Why did you confront Aerys? You knew he was mad! Why did you always have to act without thinking! Do you know what your loss did to Benjen and me! Did you even care!”

He fell to his knees then, the rage leaving him with nothing but emptiness.

“I wasn’t supposed to be the Lord.”

“But you are.”
A strong and familiar voice responded in the dark tomb causing Ned to freeze. He had not heard that voice since he was a boy. Frowning he lifted the wineskin in his hands eying it dubiously. Was it poisoned? Or perhaps it had gone off? Did he need to have the whole store restocked? That would be expensive…

“It’s not the wine boy,” the voice informed him in dry amusement. “And I expect you to look at me when I’m talking to you Eddard.”

The use of his full name had him turning to the person who spoke, finding the spectral figure of his father standing before him, looking as imposing as he had the last time he’d seen him. Ned blinked, then blinked again.

Nope, still there…

“You and Jon are amazingly similar for all that you are uncle and nephew,” Rickard commented wryly. “If I didn’t know it was the dragon that sired him I’d swear he was actually yours.”


“No, I am here before you,” Rickard acknowledged. “In a sense. The gods think it’s time you and I had a talk son.”

“Are you going to tell me how badly I failed? As if I need more proof of my short comings,” he muttered petulantly.

“You haven’t failed at anything Ned,” Rickard corrected his child. “You are doing the best you can with what life has given you. You are right, it was meant to be Brandon who ruled the north, which is why I trained him as I did. But I should have also trained you and Benjen in the same things. I should have foreseen that something could happen to any one of you and another would have to step up to those responsibilities, especially given how perilous the political atmosphere was then. But I didn’t, and you suffered for that, along with Benjen.”

“You couldn’t have known Aerys would…” Ned couldn’t even say it. Even now the thought of how his father and brother died left a bad taste in his mouth.

“I knew he was mad,” Rickard countered. “I knew Aerys was going to be a problem that we’d have to take care of. It is why I sent you south to foster. I wanted you to have ties to a southern house. It is also why I betrothed Brandon to the Tully’s and Lyanna to Baratheon. I wanted the southern alliances partially because I could feel that war was on the horizon. But I never warned my children of this. I kept it close to the chest, trying to play the game, and it cost my pack dearly. I thank the gods that you and Benjen managed to survive.” The ghost of his father sat against his tomb, making for a rather strange picture. “I promised your mother I would do what I could to make you happy, but I threw that all away for ambitions to bring power to our house. There is a reason the Starks do not have more dealings with the south than necessary and I forgot that. I also should have taught all of you how to deal with the southern powers. I opened our house up to the game and I did not prepare you to play it.”

“The game?” He had heard vague mentioning of it when he was younger, but it seemed so ridiculous to him. Life was not a game. Neither was ruling.

Rickard allowed a true grin to twist his lips. “I forgot how truly northern you can be. You were always my quiet child, so responsible and thoughtful it made you seem southern compared to your brothers and sister. But really you were the watchful wolf; the one that no one knows is there until it is too late. It is a trait you should use more often.” He paused looking to gather his thoughts. Ned
wanted to argue his words, but really he couldn’t find any fault in them. He had never been as wild as his siblings, and certainly not as boastful.

“The game is something that the southern lords and ladies tend to occupy themselves with. Us northerners don’t often entertain it because we have more pressing matters, such as survival and our people. Southerners though enjoy playing power games and seeing who comes out on top. It usually involves marrying into various houses and positioning sons and daughters into the most advantageous position for the family. The Lannisters are particularly good at the game. These people often hire spies to find information about other people, both allies and enemies so they always have the advantage. They work with lies and coin to tear their opposition down faster, most often killing them and their house. They care not who they hurt as long as it is their family that benefits.”

“That’s… that’s horrible,” Ned bit out, truly disgusted at such a thought process.

“It is life, and as a Lord it is something you need to know and utilize,” Rickard instructed.

“But… but there is no honor in…”

“Honor means nothing if your family and your people are dead.” The sharp reprimand shut Ned up.

“While I am grateful you have turned into such a good man, I lament how bloody honorable you are. Honor is a good thing, but not if it is so consuming it becomes a detriment to you and your people. That is one thing I never had to chance to remedy when you came back from the Vale. There are times when honor needs be set aside for the good of your family and your people.”

Ned looked away from his father, confused and very conflicted.

“Look Ned, do you think I was an honorable man,” Rickard asked suddenly.

“What? Yes, of course,” Ned responded, surprised at such a question. “You always did the right thing, not the easiest. You made sure to find out the truth of the matter before passing judgment. You treated everyone with respect and upheld the laws of the realm.”

“Aye, I did,” Rickard nodded in agreement. “I also had spies in every house in the north, and a few in the south.” He chuckled at the incredulous look his son was giving him. “How could I know the truth if I didn’t have people ferreting it out for me? I should trust what my people tell me? I should trust that the small folk around them would come forward if my lords were not following my laws? That’s a bit naive Ned. I knew the best way to make sure I had the truth was to have those loyal to me placed strategically, especially in the houses of those who have proven adverse to the Starks in the past. And sometimes I used men to carry out punishment before the culprits could ever make it to court, because I knew if they did they would request trial by combat. There are some crimes that cannot be forgiven, and should not be allowed the use of that loophole. Was it honorable? Not necessarily. But it was what needed to be done to protect my family and my people.”

Ned couldn’t quite form a response. How could his father have done such? Wasn’t this against what honorable men stood for? But can he really argue against his logic? Had he not lied boldfaced to Robert, Cat and everyone about Jon’s birth to ensure his nephew lived? Did he not sometimes skirt the law to ensure a truly guilty person could never again commit the same heinous crime?

“Sometimes Ned, it’s not about being honorable, it’s about being a good Lord,” Rickard pointed out helpfully. “It’s not always easy to make these choices, and sometimes you have to hold your peace when really you want to scream the truth to the world. Yet you have to weigh the costs and benefits, not only for your self, but for those you care about and the people you watch over.” Rickard was pleased to see his words were getting through to his son. Eddard had always been the most honorable of his children, the one who truly believed the best in others. It was a good quality to have,
but one that often got abused by the crafty snakes of the political world. “Talk to Rodrick, there are some lords and their spawn you should definitely have people watching out for. Better to know what’s happening in your territory than to be caught off guard.”

“Mayhap if I had learned this before I’d have known what was happening in my own house,” he lamented. “How can I be a good Lord when I can’t even seem to be a good father?”

“You are a good father,” Rickard assured him. “You love your children and they love you. Robb will get back on track. He is seeing the truth behind the kraken, and it will help him to remember never to fully trust those who are not family. Sansa needs her eyes opened a bit more to reality, but that will come with time. As for you three youngest… well they’re wolves, no doubt about that. They’ll probably give you as many heart attacks as Lyanna and Benjen gave me. So good luck handling them.”

Ned allowed a small fond smile at the thought of his children. He really hoped his father was right about his two eldest. As for the other three, well he already knew they were going to cause him to go grey well before his time. But he couldn’t ignore his true failure… his broken promise.

“And Jon? Surely you can’t say I didn’t fail with him,” Ned huffed.

“You didn’t,” Rickard stated flatly, smirking at the look he got in return. “The boy is alive because of you. Yes you lied about his parentage and you might have made it better had you told your wife in the beginning. However, I think you made the right choice in not telling her. Still, you gave Jon an education, you tried to keep him a part of the family.” Rickard leaned forward making sure his son was looking him in the eye. “You’re only human Ned. You are the Warden to the largest section of land in the Seven Kingdoms and you have a family with six children and a somewhat demanding wife. Some things slip through the cracks, even though we wish they wouldn’t. You were there for him when you could be and Jon knows that. He’s a smart boy with a good heart and he loves his family. However, he needed to leave. Jon has a destiny ahead of him, one that is great and terrible at the same time.”

“What? Destiny…what destiny,” Ned slurred slightly, not liking this direction of conversation at all.

“Jon was born for a reason,” Rickard explained solemnly. “The Starks have ruled the North for over eight thousand years. We carry the blood of the First Men and the Children of the Forest, blood that has magic in it. We bowed to none save the Targaryens and it took the presence of dragons to get us to do so. The Targaryens are the last of the Valyrian bloodlines, and they too have magic in their veins, hence the dragons. In all the time we have served the dragons, there has never been a marriage or even an affair between our houses. There has never before been a child born containing both of our bloodlines.”


“Until Jon,” Rickard echoed. “Winter is coming son, and with it comes a darkness that has not been seen for eons. Jon may be the only one able to stop it.”

“He is just a boy,” Ned argued.

“Boys grow up to be men. Jon is a dragon and a wolf; he needs to find himself and his inner strength.”

“He needs to be with his family,” Ned snarled.

“Not when his family is fractured as it is,” Rickard pointed out snidely. “The pack as it is now is
weak, and until it is healed and strong again it is best for the boy to be on his own. We are keeping an eye on him,” Rickard cut Ned off when he tried to speak again. “I know you are worried for him because you love him. But he can do this; he will survive. He won’t be gone forever. When the pack needs him most he will return.”

“I don’t know whether to be worried or comforted by that statement,” Ned admitted.

“Take it either way, or both.” Rickard shrugged with a slight grin. “Eddard, I want you to know I am very proud of you. You stepped forward to take up a mantel that was not originally meant to be yours and one you never wanted. Yet you did so with dignity and honor. You are a good man, one I am proud to call my son. Know that I love you and Benjen very much, and I do not want either of you joining us for some time. Do you understand me?”

“Aye father.” Ned swallowed thickly as tears stung at his eyes, though he refused to let them fall.

“Stay strong son. You are a Stark, it is your duty to defend and watch over the north,” Rickard advised him stoically. “What are our words?”

“Winter is coming.”
Six moons had passed since Arya had last seen her most beloved brother Jon. Many people would scold her for even choosing a favorite, but Jon had been the one most like her in their little family. While her other siblings shared the red hues of House Tully along with their bluish eyes, she and Jon had both sported dark hair and shades of grey belonging to House Stark. He also understood her in a way the rest of the family didn’t seem too. So his disappearance had hit her the hardest.

If it hadn’t been for her father, Bran and Rickon she’d likely have gone off trying to find him on her own. So what if she was a girl and only eight? She was a Stark, a wolf, and Jon was pack. She’d find him. However, the first few plans she had made to leave had been thwarted. It was Sansa of all people who talked sense into her at last. Her sister had reminded her that while Jon may have left, he didn’t want her to be without family. If he had wanted her to go on such a dangerous journey he’d have taken her. Instead he left her behind to make sure Bran and Rickon were taken care of in his place. It surprised Arya that Sansa had even suggested such, and she didn’t even try to claim Jon thought she would be a better choice for the job. In fact, Sansa had seemed to do a lot of soul searching these last moons. It was strange to see her try and spend more time with them, even going so far to play with them in the forest. Arya had thought for sure this new attitude would evaporate the moment Sansa got dirty, yet it hadn’t. It actually got better and made her far more tolerable. She even went with them to play with the children at the orphanage. It had been a habit of Jon’s when he’d lived there, sometimes taking Bran or Arya along with him. Rickon had been too small at the time, and still was. Bran and Arya agreed to take him next year.

The first few times they had gone, they had snuck out afraid they would not be allowed to go. The two middle siblings had wanted to let the matron and the children know why Jon was not coming around anymore. It had only been for a couple hours but since they didn’t get caught they figured they could do so again. Neither had realized until the third visit that their father had had them trailed the entire time to make sure they didn’t do anything foolish. He had been the one trailing them the third time, showing himself when they lost track of time and needed to return home. They had thought they would be in trouble, but their father just smiled at them and ushered them home asking after their day like it was normal. Seeing he approved of their venture they continued more often, no longer hiding when they would go. This led to Sansa joining them, bringing extra blankets and some treats to the children. She spent most of her time reading to the younger ones, or helping the matron with the babies, which was great as it left Arya and Bran more time to play with the others.

In fact Sansa started to act more northern than she had before. Bran figured it was because she was finally seeing more of how the real northerners lived, but Arya thought it had more to do with their father’s blow up at Robb and his comments about southerners. Not that she was complaining. Sansa was far more tolerable lately, not always going on and on about who she would marry or how she wanted a nice silk dress. Granted she still did embroidery and other silly girl things to please their
mother and Septa Mordane, but she didn’t join them in scolding Arya like she used to. She actually tried to be nicer to Arya, which had her wary at first, but Bran told her to give her the benefit of the doubt. Sansa was likely missing Jon too, even though she had never had the same interaction with him as the rest of them. The loss of Jon probably made her realize just what it meant to truly care for your siblings.

Robb was especially learning that lesson. Of the five Stark children he had it the worst since Jon left. Oh he’d been defiant the first few weeks, sure that their father would change his mind and rescind his punishment. He hadn’t.

Their father had remained stern and unrelenting in this, and not even his wife could change his mind. She had tried once about a week after the initial incident, thinking it had taught Robb a lesson. But Lord Stark remained firm. If Robb had learned his lesson he had to prove it. The tantrum the boy had thrown had clearly shown he had not. The defiance had turned to anger, yet slowly it started to change to resignation and acceptance. Arya didn’t think he’d reached the stage where he truly realized what his actions and words had done to their family, but he’d get there. Well, she hoped he did. Robb wasn’t so bad, when he was away from Theon.

Speaking of the Kraken, he had learned to make himself scarce in their household. While the southern and northern servants were split on the family issues, they all agreed that Theon had helped cause it. Most had not liked the boy anyway, as he applied far too many of his family’s teachings to the way he treated others. Apparently he was reaping what he sowed, or so Old Nan said. Arya wasn’t one hundred percent sure what that meant but she knew Theon was not as welcome as before.

Currently she was walking to the orphanage on her own. Bran had a slight fever so their mother was keeping him home and Sansa was doing something with Jeyne Poole today so she was on her own. Well, sort of. She still had one of the guards with her, as her father wouldn’t let them wander on their own, but whatever.

Several other children yelling her name and pulling her into their play greeted her. She happily ran towards them, knowing her guard would make himself comfortable by the porch overlooking the yard where the children ran about. For a few hours she would let herself forget that everything at home was not as well as it had once seemed to be.

Time passed by far too quickly as it always did when she was enjoying herself. The matron had called the other children in to prepare for dinner and her guard was motioning her to get on her own path home. As they walked towards Winterfell she chatted happily at the guard, telling him all about the ‘adventure’ the children had shared, even though he had been watching. The man, Donavan, she thought, just grinned and nodded letting her prattle on. Arya liked him; he never interrupted her.

“Oy, you Arya Stark?” The sudden question in a strange accent had Donavan spinning on his heal, pushing Arya behind him, hand on his sword.

Arya, not one to hide, simply popped her head out from behind her guard to see who had spoken. It was a man, not too tall by the looks of it, his face rather worn and brown from a lot of sun. He looked like a laborer of some kind and seemed to be traveling, from the bag he was carrying.

“Who wants to know,” she shot back bravely.

“Milady,” Donavan hissed slightly, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

“What? He asked,” she pointed out logically?
The man chuckled heartily, while her guard merely groaned in frustration. Honestly she didn’t see why they were reacting this way.

“Aye, he said you’d be a headstrong one,” the man stated amusedly. She wondered where he came from to talk that way. Maybe he was from Dorne? Father said they had strong accents. “As for my name, it’s Tabolt.” He did a little bow that seemed rather mocking. Arya wondered if she could copy it to use later on Sansa. “I was asked to drop you a package to return a favor.”

Curiosity peaked Arya moved to go get said package, but her guard held her back.

“Who would be sending a package to my lady,” Donavan challenged calmly, cautious about this stranger. Arya didn’t know why, he seemed harmless enough.

The man shrugged easily, like he didn’t have a care. “Boy said his name was Jon, wanted to get some letters to his siblings back home. I was headed this way so I obliged.”

The moment he uttered that name Arya couldn’t be held back. She was in front of the man practically dancing in front of him. “Jon? Yea high, curly hair, overly serious?”

The man barked out a laugh. “Aye that sounds like him.”

“Where is he? Is he okay? Is he coming home? What did he send…”

The man held up his hand to stop her rambling. “I don’t have all the answers you’re looking for. He was fine last I saw him, headed East. Since I was headed this way, he gave me something to pass on to the first sibling I saw. He described you rather well, girl.”

“What did he send,” Arya breathed out excitedly. They would finally have word from Jon! He didn’t just forget about them! She knew he wouldn’t.

She watched as he slowly moved his bag, pulling out a parcel of letters, tied together with twine. Part of her wanted to snatch it out of his hands, but she managed to restrain herself, just barely. Her father would be so disappointed if she was rude to someone doing a favor for one of their kin. The man handed them over, keeping his hands visible and moving so slowly. Why was he being so slow!

The moment her fingers curled around the pile he let go and stepped back, strange. Not that it mattered, because she had letters from Jon! It was definitely his handwriting glaring at her from the top page, addressed to her, Bran and Rickon. Oh she couldn’t wait to get home and read these!

“Do you require reimbursement for your time bringing these here, sir,” Donavan asked from directly behind her startling her slightly. When did he get so close?

“Nay,” Tabolt turned the other down with a wry grin. “This was the least I could do after the boy saved my life.”

Arya’s eyes grew wide. “He did? What happened?”

“Pirates lass,” Talbot stated seriously, eyes slightly dark. “One of ‘em tried to sneak up on me but your brother stopped him. A quick thinker that one, good with a sword.”

“Did you hear that Donavan,” she asked her guard turning to look at him, not understanding the slightly strained smile he returned to her once he broke his gaze from Tabolt. Why wasn’t he happy Jon had saved someone?

“Well, I’ll be heading on now,” Tabolt informed them, performing another slight bow. “Milady, sir.”
“Thank you sir for bringing these,” Arya chirped happily, hugging the papers to her chest. Tabolt didn’t reply simply waved his hand as he turned to leave. Arya didn’t spare him another thought, instead started making for Winterfell with speed, Donavan following easily given his longer legs. “Oh, this is so wonderful! I have to get Bran and Rickon together and we can read what Jon wrote! I knew he wouldn’t stay out of touch forever! I just knew it!”

By the time they made it to the main gate she was ready to burst. She didn’t even wait for it to open all the way before she squeezed through and ran off looking for Bran. Rickon was likely with the Septa or their mother and she wouldn’t want to hear about the letters. Besides, they were addressed to the three of them, no one else. She’d make sure to read the letters to Rickon later.

She found Bran in the yard practicing his archery. “Bran! Bran!”

“What,” he snapped, letting loose the arrow too soon and missing the target. “Arya! Look what you made me do!”

“Who cares about that stupid,” she huffed, holding up the stack of parchment. “We have letters!”

“What?” Bran blinked at her in confusion. “Who would write you?”

“I said we, stupid,” she growled. “As in me, you and Rickon. And they’re from Jon!”

Bran dropped his bow, jaw slack. “Really? You’re not japing?”

“No! Look.” She showed him the handwriting on the upper most letters clearly depicting their names.

“How…”

“A man, Tabolt he said his name was. He traveled here from the sea, said Jon asked him to drop these off to us,” she explained hastily. “He said it was an easy favor ’cause Jon saved his life from pirates!”

“Pirates!”

“I know!” Both of them hoped he wrote about the encounter in his letters. “Where’s Rickon?”

“With mother,” Bran warned her quickly. “We should go to your room and read them, we can fill him in later.”

“Right!”

The two scampered off into the main Keep. They didn’t run into anyone easily closing themselves into Arya’s room. The twine came away easily, allowing them to sort through the carefully folded paper.

“Where should we start,” Bran asked. “Top to bottom?”

“No, look, they have dates,” Arya announced happily. “Oh this one is only a week after he left. It says…”

A knock on the door startled them. They guiltily hid the letters worried someone would try and take them away.

“Uh… yes?”
The door opened revealing their father. From the look on his face he clearly didn’t believe the innocent act they were going for.

“Donavan informed me you received letters from Jon today,” he stated calmly, though both of his children could see the slight tightening of his eyes. “Is this true?”

“Yes,” Arya grumbled, not wanting to admit to their treasure, afraid it would be taken away, but knowing she could not lie to her father. Her father’s eyebrow lifted at her tone but he didn’t scold her.

“May I see them,” he asked wryly when the two didn’t show them on their own.

“But we haven’t read them yet father,” Bran argued.

“Then perhaps we can all read them together, as a family,” he suggested, though something in his tone hinted it was not a suggestion.

Arya pulled them out from their hiding place, handing them to her father. “But why? Mother, Sansa and Robb won’t care, and they’re addressed to Bran, Rickon and me.”

Her father paused seeming to think it over. “Then how about I suggest it at dinner, and if they do not want to join they do not have to, and we will read them in my solar after.”

“But dinner is ages away father,” Bran groaned in protest.

“Surely we can read some now,” Arya added.

“Actually dinner is about to start, so you would have to wait in any case,” he informed them dryly. “I doubt your mother will allow you to miss a meal to read letters.”

Both children groaned but made their way out of the room to the dining hall with their father trailing them.

It was going to be a long meal.
chapter 6 Eddard

Ned ate as calmly as he could, though really he wanted to follow Arya and Bran’s example and finish quickly so he could retire to his solar and see what Jon had written. After months of no word, finally he had proof that his nephew was alive and hopefully well. Though from what Donavan had reported it seemed Jon had made his first kill. A skirmish with pirates apparently. It pained him to think his ‘son’ had been forced to take a life at such a young age, but another part was proud he had done so in the defense of others.

Glancing at his family he could see Catelyn getting frustrated with Bran and Arya’s refusal to slow their chewing, and Rickon trying to follow their lead. Sansa ate at a slow pace, as was proper for ladies, while Robb picked at his meal in the far seat, having lost the right to the heir’s seat all those months ago. His son was learning some very painful lessons, but best they happen now then in a time where such could be deadly. Theon was missing, having not been welcome at this table for some time. He made sure the boy had an eye on him, but considering he spent most of his time in his room, the yard or at the brothel there wasn’t much to worry about.

Many things had changed for their family since Jon left, some bad, yet also some good. He had taken his father’s advice to heart and spoke to Ser Roderick. Their information network was now back in place, or should he say it was revitalized, as those who were loyal to his father had continued their duty waiting for the time they would be asked for the information. The intelligence they gathered was enlightening to say the least. He had already sent out orders for certain holds to be more closely monitored. While he hated not trusting his banner men, some of the information was troubling enough to warrant such vigilance.

“Oh honestly,” Catelyn huffed in annoyance, breaking his thoughts. “What has gotten into you two tonight?”

“They are simply excited my lady,” he informed her. “They received several letters today and I would not allow them to read them until after dinner. We will do so in my solar if any of you wish to join.”

“Letters from whom,” Sansa asked wondering who would send letters to her younger siblings. Catelyn and Robb looked equally confused.

“From Jon,” he replied casually, watching their reactions carefully.

Catelyn frowned eyes narrowed but held her tongue. He knew she blamed Jon for the current issues with their family, yet she just could not see Jon was not to blame. The problems were there hidden from sight; Jon’s departure had simply brought them into the light, not caused them. She needed to stop using the boy as a scapegoat for their family’s own shortcomings.

Sansa looked interested, yet unsure if she would be welcome, seeing the way she glanced towards her younger siblings. They had been including her a bit more in their play, now that she was making an effort, but there were still some barriers in their relationship. Still, he was pleased that she was showing more interest in her heritage and people. The trips to the orphanage had helped her see that life was not a story, nor could one pretend it was.

Robb had scowled darkly before a thoughtful look took over, which quickly morphed into a sad frown. Perhaps he was remembering the time when he and Jon had been inseparable? Part of him wished he could tell his son that one day it would go back to the way it was, when he and Jon were the closest of friends. However, he couldn’t because it would never be the same. Robb had broken
Jon’s trust, and trust lost can never be fully re-earned.

“Jawn,” Rickon asked, looking around for his missing brother. The boy was too young to fully understand that Jon was not going to just walk into the room. He had been very unhappy for weeks when the boy didn’t come to tell him stories or play with him.

“Yes, Jon.” Bran turned to his brother. “He wrote us about his trip,” he explained. “Like the stories he would tell us when he was here.”

“Stowies?”

“About Jon,” Arya added not carrying that she had a roll stuffed in her mouth.

“Jawn stowie?” Rickon looked to Ned, who nodded in confirmation. The boy squealed happily wriggling in his seat as if to escape.

Ned chuckled as he stood scooping his youngest into his arms. “Well, it seems we have finished our meal, so perhaps we should go ahead and adjourn to my solar.”

Bran and Arya were out of their seats in a heartbeat, rushing past Ned to get to the room. Sansa followed at a much more sedate pace, but she went nonetheless. Robb looked unsure, but then pushed himself out of his chair following after his siblings. Only Catelyn remained looking rather torn, yet stubbornly refusing to move. Ned said nothing, just inclined his head in silent difference to her decision and carried Rickon to his study. He actually preferred she stay away given her continued opinion of Jon.

He found the Bran and Arya on the furs in front of his fire, while Sansa took one of the empty chairs. Robb stood across the room, looking out the window, but he would be able to hear just the same. Ned plopped Rickon in Sansa’s lap before taking his own seat, pulling the letters out to read.
Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

First off I want to apologize for leaving as I did. If I could have said my goodbyes I would have, but I knew no one would have willingly let me leave.

I want you three to know that my leaving was not the fault of any of you. Nor do I want you to blame or be angry at those you likely know or believe caused me to leave. In the end, leaving was my choice not theirs. If you want to place blame, then blame me for not being strong enough to stay.

I must seem terribly craven to you three, however I just could not stay any more. I might have survived the whispers and ill hidden disdain from those who looked down on me for my parentage, but I could not stand my honor and trustworthiness degraded to the point of nothingness. If some had their way I would be painted a true villain with only the Night’s Watch as my hope for redemption.

I could not let that happen. I love Uncle Benjen and Father, but their version of the Night’s Watch that they tell to us is a far cry from the truth. More and more those that join are criminals looking to escape justice in one form or another. They see the Watch as the lesser of punishments. That I am baseborn would likely not have meant much to them, but with the training and education I have received thanks to our father’s generous nature, they would likely target me as an interloper to their world.

As much as I do not want to tell you the hard truths of the world, I feel as your brother I must, if only so you can prepare yourselves. The world is a cruel and unjust place. Many who are punished do not deserve it, and other who do, escape punishment either because of their title, or some loophole in the law. Honor seems to be more of a choice than a reality, with many only choosing to implement it when it suits their purposes.

I want you three to know this so that you can beware of those that would harm our family. The Starks and much of the North truly believe in honor, and many know that. As such, they tend to use it against us, or manipulate events to work in their favor so our honor will compel us not to act. It is up to you three to guard against threats to our family now. I am sorry to leave such a large task on your small shoulders, but I know the three of you will prevail. You’re too stubborn not to.

I cannot tell you where I am headed. I can only tell you that I need to do this. I need to make sure the Jon you know will still exist. Had I stayed, I fear he would have been worn away to nothing. I promise I will always think of you and I will write to you often. I may not be able to send the letters frequently but I will try.

Arya, stay strong. I know you dislike how you seem different from the rest of the family. The only one other than me to share the Stark features. However, they are your pack, and they love you dearly. Don’t give your parents too much trouble, and take the lessons your Septa gives you. I know you do not like maidenly pursuits, but think of them as a weapon in their own right. Only the sewing and manners are your sword and shield instead of steel and wood. I have seen Lady Stark defend our home from several visiting Lords and Ladies looking to find fault with our family, but she defeated them with courtesy and grace. I am not saying you cannot still learn to fight, but maybe include these lessons into your arsenal for a time you may need the knowledge. After all it is better to have the knowledge and not need it, than to need the knowledge and not have it. I love you my wild wolf.

Bran, keep working hard. I know you feel you will never measure up to Robb or the other Lordlings, but that is okay. You needn’t measure up to them. Instead, you need to be the best you that you can
be. You Bran are clever and smart, with a kind heart. You have skills and talents that others do not. Do not be afraid to sharpen those, they will only help you in the end. Continue to learn and grow, whether with your letters and numbers or weapons in the training yard, it takes time to become skilled. Don’t lose faith if you do not get something perfect right away. I know you will get where you are meant to be. Though I do wish you would not climb so often. You may be as sure-footed as a mountain goat, but really some of the walls are not fit for wandering on! I love you my climbing wolf.

Rickon, always smile. I know you are too young to really know me, and I am saddened that I will not get to watch you grow. I am sorry I could not finish reading you the story I made for you. I did leave it in the library behind the history books. Get Arya and Bran to read it to you. I also left theirs for them if they want. Make sure to listen to your siblings, they may seem overbearing at times, but they are just looking out for you. Remember that family is everything and you need to all look out for each other. I love you my little wolf.

Make sure you three look out for Sansa and Robb as well. I know you may think neither need it, but in reality they do.

Sansa works hard to be the perfect lady for your parents, and so sometimes she doesn’t always see the danger some people pose, especially men. You must be vigilant when she is not. Also help her to laugh and don’t ignore her just because she prefers the gentler pursuits. She has a lot of pressure on her in being the firstborn daughter because of future prospects and marriages. What she is learning may not be things any of you enjoy, but they will help her when she has a family of her own. She is also your older sister, and family is important.

Robb needs you three to make sure he doesn’t bite off more than he can chew. I know that right now he doesn’t seem as nice as he used to, but he’ll grow out of that. He is still your big brother. He’s also the heir and that’s a lot of responsibility and a big burden. It is not easy to be the firstborn son of a lord, especially not a Lord Paramount. Many people will try to befriend him or use him just for his position. It is the duty of the rest of the pack to make sure those that are not genuine don’t get close enough to hurt him.

Be good for father and Lady Catelyn. Both of them have a lot they must manage, not just our pack. So sometimes you need to give them some space and understanding if they do not have much time. And when they ask you to do things or learn something it is not to torture you (no matter what Arya says) it is to help prepare you for the future when you will be adults. Listen to what they say and go to them if you have questions. They love you all very much and would do anything for you, always remember that.

I think of you every night, and I hope you will forgive me for leaving. One day we will see each other again. Many roads can lead to the same castle.

Love,

Jon.”

Ned leaned back in his chair thoughtfully as he looked over the letter quickly again. His children were unnaturally quiet, except for a few sniffles here and there. Rickon obviously wasn’t quite sure what was happening, given his age, though the mood of the others was affecting him. Not that he could blame them. Jon’s words had been both touching and truthful. Part of him was pleased that he still thought of Robb and Sansa, as well as himself and Cat when speaking to his children. Given what he had learned about some of what went on prior to his leaving he wouldn’t have been surprised if the boy had forgotten them altogether.
Yet he hadn’t, because as he said family was important.

When he had first begun reading he had worried that perhaps he had made a mistake, yet now he was glad he had continued. The children needed to hear these words. They could not continue to be sheltered forever, despite his desire to do so. Mayhap if they learn more about the way the world truly works their family could learn more about themselves to heal and become stronger?

Already he had learned things about his children he did not know. So it was a good hope for him to have.

“Shall I continue with the next one?” No one responded, so he took the next letter in the stack. This one had a few extra pieces of parchment, yet it was not words that decorated the paper, but pictures. He instantly recognized the dock from White Harbor, which was drawn with such precision it left him breathless. Had Jon always had this talent? “It appears he is… was in White Harbor.”

“How do you know,” Arya demanded, eyes red from the earlier tears.

“Because I recognize the docks,” he replied with a small bit of humor, showing the picture to the children. They instantly moved closer to get a look, though only his elder two seemed surprised by the skill of the drawing. He then pulled out the other two with it, one showing a large ship and the other a study of faces, none that Ned recognized.

“Jon drew these,” Sansa queried in quiet awe.

“Jon loves to draw,” Bran answered. “These aren’t as good as the ones he drew for our stories though.”

“He probably didn’t have enough time,” Arya snorted, a fond look in her eyes. “You know what a perfectionist he is about his pictures.” Bran just nodded in response. Ned filed the information away to ask about later.

“Well, in this one he writes…

Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

I hope the gods are keeping you and our family well. I trust you are doing your best to either behave or drive the rest of Winterfell insane. Hopefully you are not too wroth with me, though I imagine you are. At least I like to think you are not so mad that you will ignore my letters, but should you I will understand.

I have made it to my destination. Again, I will not tell you where I am, but I did draw you a picture of how the docks look. Yes, I am in a port city and the ship I drew for you is the one I will be embarking on for the next stage of my journey. It has an interesting name, though I will not tell you what, but I can tell you it is named after a woman. According to the sailors it is good luck to name a vessel after a woman. Something to do with treating the ship as one would treat a lady. Considering some of the chores I have had to perform onboard to prove my work abilities, I don’t think any lady would like to be treated thusly. They most certainly would not like the language uttered by the men onboard. (And no I will not be telling you what words were spoken. Lady Catelyn would find a way to hunt me down and thrash me for such.)

The Captain is a fair man, though not very amiable. He is the one with the braided beard and eye patch. At first I was worried about approaching him, however he seemed a better bet than some of the other captains I saw. One man was dressed in fine robes of silk, claiming to have the best salary for any man to join his crew, as he worked for a wealthy Lord. He looked like a very well to do
nobleman. Yet my gut told me something was off, so I did not go with him. Always trust your gut little wolves, for it is right more often than not. That man ended up being a slaver from the Slaver’s Bay, looking to trick people onto his ship to sell them later to make a profit. Thankfully the local Lord has been vigilant for such and the man was found and arrested not long after his arrival. Father will likely hear about it sometime soon.

The captain I have chosen to work for has a very good reputation with the workingmen at the docks. When he gives his word he keeps it, and he looks out for his men even if he doesn’t like them. There is another lesson. While you should take rumors with a grain of salt, the word of those who truly deal with a man can give you a good measure of his character. So do not judge solely on looks. So far it has benefitted me to follow this advice. The work is tiring and sometimes difficult, but I always feel accomplished at the end of the day.

The second man on the parchment, with the funny hat is the first mate. He runs the ship while the captain is busy dealing with customers or charting courses. He’s a rather funny man, always smiling and telling jokes. Most are certainly not appropriate for one my age, and some I do not fully understand, so I just smile and nod hoping I have not grown to red in embarrassment. I do not think I have succeeded the way most of the others laugh.

The one with the baldhead is the next in charge. He is from one of the far cities in the east and stands easily over six feet. Just one of his hands alone is bigger than my face! He is very strong and has taken to teaching me what I need to know about sailing. It is hard to understand him at times because of his accent, however he is surprisingly patient and very calm. I like being in his presence as it keeps me settled. He is also taking time to teach me to control my temper. I had thought I was okay at such, but apparently I am not so good at it.

It led me to meeting the last man depicted. His name I shall tell you so if you ever see him or hear it you will know to stay away. He is Bronn, a sellsword that is uncouth, underhanded and an all around cretin! He makes Theon seem reasonable in comparison! I ran into him one evening when running an errand for the ship healer. He was harassing some ladies in one of the allies. They were ladies with a rather unfortunate occupation that often must deal with men, but it was clear they were not happy with his attention. I just kept thinking if Arya or Sansa were in such a position and it angered me, so I stepped in. It was not a wise decision on my part. I admit I was thoroughly thrashed by the man, and had one of the crew not seen me I could have been much worse off. I forgot Ser Rodrick’s main lesson of looking before I leapt. I suffered quite a few bruises and a nasty cut to my right eyebrow for my efforts. You should know that I am very lucky that my injuries were not worse, as I can now recognize, after calming down, the man was very skilled (though I loath to say such). Let my mistake not be yours.

The strangest thing of all though was that Bronn seemed amused by me. He had the nerve to call me adorable! (Stop laughing Arya, I am not ADORABLE! I am a boy; boys are in no way such things!) He also made a rather horrid proposition to me that I would have tried to avenge had my crewmate not had a hold of me. Remember if you see him stay far away from him! I am only thankful that I will not have to see him again as we will be leaving port in the morning to begin our journey.

I will write to you again soon, but for now I must prepare to leave. Remember to study your lessons and keep an eye out for each other.

I love you all,

Jon”

Ned found this letter far more enjoyable, though he really wished Jon had picked his fights a bit more carefully. In fact he should know better than to start fights. Luckily he learned this lesson with limited
injury, and his life intact. The rest of it was a bit more promising, and he could see his advice about not judging people on looks had struck a chord with some of his children. He doubted Arya or Bran fully understood at their age, though they would likely take it to heart simply because Jon told them. Rickon definitely didn’t understand. Robb and Sansa however had seemed shocked at what he described had occurred.

“Is it true father,” Sansa questioned, a frown forming. “The man that Jon described as working for a lord and being well to do. Did he end up being a slaver?”

“Yes,” he responded gravely, trying to show the importance of this subject. “The man was found to be a slaver, trying to trick others onto his ship. Though he is a foreigner our laws forbid such, and he knew this. Thus he will face our law.”

“So he lied about working for a lord,” she pressed, looking slightly relieved. “He was just pretending to be highborn.”

“No.” The shock on her face and that of his other children was humorous and sad at the same time. “He does indeed work for a lord from the city of Meereen. There slavery is not outlawed. Jon is right that one should not judge someone by their looks alone. I will add that just because someone is a lord, or of high standing, it does not mean they are a good person. I have met many people who present a promising front, only to show their true hearts to be black and twisted.”

“But how do you know?” Arya frowned in confusion. “If they seem good, or honorable, how can you tell for sure they are not?”

“That is a very difficult question,” Ned admitted. “Sometimes you can’t until they betray your trust. Sometimes you just have a feeling inside of you, instinctually telling you the person is not right. Listen to that. You can also do as Jon did and speak to those who deal with that person regularly, or enough to give some idea of their character. It is a hard lesson to learn, and you can still be fooled if the person is a skilled enough liar. This is why it is imperative that you have people you trust around you. It is also why we of the north try to foster strong family bonds, because you should be able to trust your family above all else.”

He could tell his words affected Robb the most, as he had actual experience with his trust being proven wrong by one he thought true. The others were thinking over his words, which he was glad for, but he hoped they never felt the same betrayal Robb, and Jon to an extent, went through.

“Shall we continue? There seems to be another two to read.”
“Dear Arya, Bran, and Rickon,

I have come to the conclusion that the gods either hate me or find humor in torturing me. The sellsword Bronn is on the very same ship I have taken to working on. He is apparently escorting a merchant who is one of our passengers to his next destination. You can imagine my ire at finding the infuriating man sharing my space once more. Sadly there is nothing I can do, as he is with a paying customer. Zee (that is the nickname for the bald man I told you about) has tried to keep me busy and away from the man. It hasn’t worked for the most part.

Bronn seems far more interested in me than I prefer. He has taken to following me around, saying all manner of inappropriate things trying to get me to react. He asks far more questions than I am comfortable with as well. He likes to comment the most on my fighting skills, (what little I have according to him). He seems sure I am really the son of some Lord due to the training he sees in my movements. As I am trying to keep my identity secret, you can imagine I have not confirmed his conjecture.

Zee seems to think this is good practice in controlling my temper. I must admit I am getting better at not reacting to the man, and I have started to learn to let words roll over me. However, Bronn is annoying enough he can still find the right words to stoke my anger.

It finally came to head one day when he attacked me unexpectedly. Of course I reacted the way Ser Rodrick taught me and managed to block the blow. I thought someone might step in to put a stop to it, but they did not. Instead I found myself fighting with the sell sword. Only, he started critiquing my technique and giving me pointers. We must have been at it for an hour before he declared us done for the day and instructed me to be on deck at the same hour the next day! I told him I couldn’t because I had work to do, but he said he’d already worked it out with the captain. He also told me to be grateful he was bothering to teach a boy like me such skills. (Well actually he said some other things but I cannot in good conscience write them to you.)

I would love to say I told him to jump off the ship, but I cannot. In truth he is a very skilled fighter, and I will need all the teaching I can get to survive. So though it pains me greatly, I find myself training with Bronn for an hour each day, sometimes more. I can already see some improvement in my skill and I have gained more muscle to help with my work. Though the way he cheats bothers me, I also cannot deny the logic of using such technics. When you get into a fight it is not about being honorable; it is about not dying. If using such a technique can save my life or the life of one I care for, then I will use what methods I have.

On a lighter note, once we got further out to sea our ship came upon some very interesting creatures that live in the water. Zee said they are called whales. They come to the surface often, and have family groups. Some can even jump out of the water, though they rarely do so. I added a few pictures of the ones I saw. They were larger than the ship with huge tails and flipper arms they used to push them through the water. The whales we came upon had a bluish coloring to their skin, which looked very smooth. Connor, another shipmate, said there are different types of whales, depending on where you are in the ocean. He even said once we get further south there will be creatures that are smaller and sleeker that swim around the ship and constantly jump in and out of the waves as if they are dancing. He says they are called Phins. I will hopefully see these and send you pictures of them as well.

Thinking of you always.
Love,

Jon

Indeed there were the promised pictures. All of them looked on in awe at the pictures Jon had provided. If not for seeing his true skill in the other pictures they might have claimed these creatures to be made up, as none of them had seen a whale before. However, the detail and multiple angles depicted showed Jon had done a lot of work to capture the creatures to the best of his ability. If they were as large as he claims then they were truly magnificent beasts.

“Are these real,” Bran asked, his tone tinged with longing and awe.

“I do not know, though I doubt Jon would lie about such things,” Ned answered truthfully.

“Of course he wouldn’t,” Arya snorted. “Jon says you shouldn’t lie unless it’s really important, like protecting someone’s life. But when you’re giving information to someone about something they don’t know, you should be as honest as possible, even if it means saying you don’t know.”

“Wise words,” he murmured, very proud of his nephew for teaching his ‘siblings’ such wisdom. Though part of him felt sad that Jon was wary enough at such a young age to know that sometimes lies were necessary. While he knew bastards grew faster than other children, he had not realized how much Jon had grown without him noticing.

“Would Lord Manderly know of such creatures father,” Sansa piped up, blue eyes wide with wonder. “Do you think we might take a trip to see?”

All of the children, even Robb, were looking at him with hope. He bit back a chuckle at just how young and childlike all of them appeared. “I will write to him and see. Then we will discuss it further.”

That certainly perked them up, as it usually did when he didn’t say no immediately.

“Jawn,” Rickon interrupted, pulling on the last letter Ned held in his hands.

“Of course Rickon,” he chuckled. “I would not forget the last letter. Are you ready?”

“Jawn.” The boy nodded his head seriously, snuggling further into Sansa’s hold.

“This one looks to be dated about a month after the last. It says…

Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

I apologize for not writing in some time but the work aboard the ship has kept me very busy. On top of that Bronn and a few of my shipmates have taken to teaching me all sorts of combat techniques, whether I want them or not. One man is from Yi Ti, and has a very strange style that utilizes movement of one’s opponent against them. I have gained more bruises from being thrown to the deck in the past weeks than in my entire time training with Ser Rodrick. (Please do not tell him that, should I ever return he is likely to try and make up for any perceived oversight)

I also managed to survive my first storm at sea. If you never experience such I will be forever grateful to the gods. Never had I been so scared. The ship rocked with such ferocity I feared it would topple over into the water. The waves crashed so hard on the decks that two of the minor masts broke, and several barrels of supplies were washed over. We almost lost a few men the same way, but the captain made us all wear harnesses to keep us tied to the ship. A good measure or we would be several hands short.
The worst part was how dark it was. The storm clouds turned a clear day into a mass of darkness not even the deepest night could match. The lanterns helped very little as the waves and motion of the ship kept them shifting too much to truly be of use. I could barely see a foot beyond my face, and could not recognize my fellow shipmates if not for their voices. My heart beat so fast I feared it would jump right out of my chest. To me it felt like days before the storm finally abated, but according to Zee it was only a few hours and we were lucky it was such a small one. I pray I never have to sail through a large storm if this was considered small.

Hodges says it was just the sea’s way of telling us when she is upset or moody, as she is the ultimate woman, ever changing in her moods. (The man could have been a bard the way he waxes on about certain subjects.) When I asked how we could appease ‘her’, he just laughed. ‘There is no appeasing an angry woman boy,’ he told me. ‘You simply get out of her way and let her do as she wills.’

Several of the men agreed with this, though I am unsure of why. Most just told me I’d understand when I am older, however, a few told me I would never understand for the minds of women are forever mysterious to men. Again, not really sure what that means. I would suggest asking Old Nan, or even Lady Stark (though I am unsure if your mother would be happy with such questions, so best go to Nan).

We have spent the last few days cleaning up the wreckage and trying to repair the masts that were damaged. Surprisingly we are not the only ship to have gone through the storm. We came across another boat, this one headed north, which also suffered damages. The captain brokered a deal with them and now we are all working together to repair both ships. Zee said that unless they are pirates or even a royal navy, captains on the open water will take time to help other ships out, because it is the right thing to do. They might fight with each other or steal each other’s business when necessary, but on the open water such things are put aside to ensure survival. It truly is amazing how different the culture of those who sail is from our own. There are a hundred little traditions and implied rules that only those in this life understand, just the way only Northerners seem to understand the solstice traditions. The best example I think you might understand is when your uncle came from the Riverlands and he was confused as to why we burned the fallen leaves during the blood moon, to honor the old gods.

You should remember to keep open minds when you go to others places, even in the north. There could be traditions or cultural norms that you know nothing about and you could insult someone gravely if you break them, even unintentionally. Bronn says (and yes it pains me greatly to agree with anything that man says) that when you first get to a new place you need to watch and listen to those around you before you do anything in specific. Gather information, especially about the way people expect to be treated. This not only helps one to blend in, but could save your life. While I find it hard to believe he has ever utilized this course of action, I can admit the advice is sound.

I am afraid there is not much more to say. However, I did draw out some of the techniques I have been learning. These are hand to hand fighting techniques you can use to protect yourselves or escape if someone tries to harm you. And before you complain (Arya) it is not a defeat to retreat and regroup, especially at your ages. There is nothing wrong with running to gather help or find a different way to fight. I will admit I myself am still learning to do this. It is not easy, but it also does not make you a coward. Sometimes one must live to fight another day. I do however ask that you not attempt more than the basics I have shown you. I will send more pictures later, to give you time to master the moves I have diagramed for you. Remember, one must have a solid base technique before they can truly learn any of the rest.

I love you all. Keep watching over father, Sansa, Robb and Lady Stark for me.

Jon"
Ned pulled the additional pages out from behind the letter and indeed there were several drawings with explanations that were easy to follow. These had far more effort put into them than the previous pictures, likely so Jon could clearly show his siblings what he had learned and help them learn too. It warmed his heart that Jon was thinking of ways to help his siblings, even so far from home. Granted, he didn’t really care for the idea of them learning how to fight hand to hand, especially Arya, yet he could also see the wisdom in such.

“Can we have those,” Arya goaded from where she now stood by his desk, neck craning to try and get a glimpse.

“Jon did send them to us,” Bran added, eyes hopeful.

“Of course you can’t,” Robb huffed earning glares from his younger children. Ned thought to interrupt but Robb continued. “He has to talk to Ser Rodrick to make sure the technique is a good one and that the moves are safe to learn. He’s not just going to let you learn something like fighting without adult supervision.”

“Jon taught us all sorts of stuff just fine,” Arya argued. “He wouldn’t have sent anything we couldn’t learn or was unsafe.”

“But when Jon was here he could watch over you,” Sansa reminded them softly. She seemed strangely sad after hearing the letters. Maybe she too was feeling Jon’s absence? “And all fighting is dangerous in some manner.”

“Your siblings are right,” Ned cut in to keep the peace. “While these moves do look easy and he writes several precautions, you will still need an adult to supervise your training. If for no other reason than to make sure you are preforming the moves correctly.”

“But you’ll let us learn,” Arya hedged, eyes widening in the way it did when she really wanted something. If he was not careful the lip would come out as well.

“I will discuss it with Ser Rodrick, then I will decide,” he told her sternly, not about to be coerced by his child. Sadly to his children that was apparently permission on his part. Honestly, what was he to do with these pups? “In the meantime, it is getting close to bed time for you. I suggest you run off to prepare.”

“Can we get the story books Jon left for us in the library,” Bran pleaded. “The one for Rickon usually helps him fall asleep.”

“Stowie,” Rickon crowed happily as he clapped his hands.

Ned chuckled a bit, knowing he would acquiesce the request, especially since his youngest had been giving them all trouble when it was time to sleep. “Alright, I will go and retrieve them, while you lot go to your rooms.”
The next set of letters arrived while they were in White Harbor, a little more than half a year later. It had taken time, planning and several letters with Lord Manderly to determine the best time to view the whales, as Jon called them. The Lord of White Harbor was ecstatic to hear that his liege lord wanted to bring his children to see his city and learn more about the creatures of the sea. Normally Ned would have had one of the children stay behind, as a Stark must always be in Winterfell, however Catelyn had argued that she was a Stark, so she would stay and allow her children this unique learning opportunity. He also doubted she wanted to travel to another Lord’s keep as the northern lords had not been very happy with her actions and disregard of the northern ways. With Steward Poole and Ser Roderick helping her they would be fine. Maester Luwin and Septa Mordane would be traveling with them to learn more about these whales and to help with the children respectively.

They had been there for about a week, already having taken one ship out to view some whales. The children had been amazed to see the creatures, even though they were a different kind than the ones Jon had seen. Lord Manderly had gone with them, explaining what he knew of the creatures. He’d been impressed with Jon’s drawings, as had his Maester. The Captain of the ship and some of the sailors even regaled the children with stories of encounters with the gentle giants. They planned to remain another few days before departing back to Winterfell, as Ned didn’t want to be away from home for too long.

His children had all behaved admirably, much to his pleasure, including Robb, who’d undergone a transformation in the last year since his punishment began. His son was becoming more like the heir he should be, much to Ned’s pleasure. No longer did he have the same arrogance he’d shown before. He had learned to be humble and appreciative of his family and people. Though Ned had yet to fully rename him Stark and his heir, that day was not long off.

Sansa had also changed a great deal. While she still loved her stories of Knights and maidens, as well as some of the Southern styles, she had tempered that with a more realistic view of the world. She no longer spent her days dreaming about some prince or lord, while she sewed and gossiped with Jeyne Poole. Instead she included other duties, such as helping at the orphanage, helping her mother with running the household and even helping out in the glass gardens. She had also started to really get to know the people around them, looking past status to see the true person beneath. Catelyn had not been thrilled with her daughter’s new pragmatism, but even she could not argue that it was a benefit to their daughter in the long run.

Their other children were still mostly living up to their moniker of wolf pups. They were constantly running around getting into things and finding new adventures. Rickon was getting big enough to follow Arya and Bran just about everywhere. More often than not the trio would come home dirty and tired but grinning from ear to ear. However, they tempered this behavior with attending their lessons and putting effort into them. Even Arya was putting more energy into her lessons in the feminine pursuits, which both surprised and pleased Catelyn. Though his wife was a bit chagrined when she learned Arya only did such to ‘prepare for battle’ with any Lady that came into her home. The look on her face when Ned shared with her that part of Jon’s letter was quite amusing, especially when she couldn’t refute the words.

Truthfully Ned thought some of the changes were brought about by the stories Jon left behind. His two oldest children seemed especially affected by them.

At first he was unsure of what to expect when he went to the library for the stories Jon promised his
younger siblings. Maester Luwin happened to be up as well and kindly showed him the small ‘books’ Jon had made for the children. They were crudely made, with old thread used to keep the pages together, the parchment not necessarily the best quality. However, the writing and pictures inside had been completed with the utmost care and precision. Luwin had admitted he had suggested Jon go to the citadel more than once, but the boy had sadly not been interested in becoming a maester. Ned certainly understood why Luwin made the suggestion when looking at the work presented.

The most surprising thing though was finding not three stories, but four. It seemed Jon had made one for Sansa, though he had never presented it to her, fearing she would reject it. Luwin also hinted that there was another book Jon kept in his room, showcasing the adventures he had had as a child with his brother Robb, but the man had not seen it in some time. Ned had taken the time later to search Jon’s room in case it was still there. He was pleased to find it was, hidden in a small cache in the wall that was not easily visible. This one was not a finished work, like the other four and it brought a pang of sadness to his heart. Jon had worked on this one far longer than the others, clearly trying to remember a better time when his brother still cared for him. For a time he even considered not showing it to Robb, yet in the end he decided it would do his son good to remember the past as well.

Each of his children guarded their little storybooks with the fierceness of their sigil. Even Sansa snapped at those who tried to handle her book without her permission, and if she did allow it she watched them like a hawk to make sure no damage came to the delicate pages. Catelyn had been rather disturbed at first, not liking the idea of Jon leaving her children anything. Yet, once she had seen the care and thought put into each story she had softened some. A bastard who had no honor or hated his family would never put the effort and time into such gifts. No, a boy who loved his family dearly and would do anything for them made these. Not that Ned, or the children for that matter, would have allowed her to take the stories away in any case.

Aside from the book about Jon and Robb’s youthful adventures, the stories were tailored to each child. There were lessons and hard truths in the words, tempered by the fairytale quality of his writing. However, all of them spoke to the importance of family, duty, honor and the reminder that winter was coming.

The boy truly had a talent.

Ned was with Lord Manderly and a few of his stewards when the visitor came. The children were out with Maester Luwin receiving lessons about the history of White Harbor and how the shipping industry worked. Septa Mordane had followed to keep the children in line. Ned was glad for it, as they certainly would not have been entertained with the subjects the lords were going over. Truly there were days Ned wished he had not become Lord of Winterfell, if only to escape the necessary evil involved in the logistics of running such a vast portion of the kingdom.

Keeping the north fed and safe was a constant battle in these harsh lands. It certainly didn’t help that he knew, deep in his bones, that winter was indeed coming, though he could not say when. He did know it would be in his lifetime and likely within a decade. In the south, stocking for winter was difficult and often cumbersome, but if overlooked it would not prove too much of an issue. In the north, to not prepare was to invite certain death.

White Harbor, as one of the few port cities in the north, was a key factor in helping them prepare. This is the only reason he didn’t complain about going over the books for the fifth time this visit.

A knock on the solar door interrupted them, much to Ned’s gratefulness.

“What is it,” Manderly called out.
The door opened to show one of the guards. “My Lords, there is a merchant from Santh that has requested an audience…”

“Tell him we’re busy and send him off,” Manderly ordered flippantly. “I’ll deal with him later.”

“You mistake me my lord,” the guard responded hesitantly. “He is asking for an audience with Lord Stark. He had planned to go to Winterfell to treat with him, but upon learning of his presence thought it best to speak to him now if permitted.”

“A merchant from Santh,” Ned asked thoughtfully, before a thought hit him. Santh was in Essos. Was it possible Jon had traveled there and this man had news? “Did he mention why or say anything else?”

“He did not state why he wanted to speak to you directly my lord, but he did ask if any of your younger children were here, as he had a package for them,” the guard trailed off unsure if he had made a mistake. All of the guards had found it odd that a merchant from across the sea would have anything for the Stark children.

“Lord Manderly, would you be amiable to us picking up our current discussions at a later time,” Ned asked as politely as he could, just barely remembering that this wasn’t his solar.

“Oh, that’s alright. You have far more experience with merchants from Essos than I, so I would appreciate any assistance you can provide,” Ned admitted easily. While there were some of his lords he would not admit such weakness to, if any, Manderly was a trusted man and Ned would gladly use his knowledge to his benefit.

“My pleasure.” Manderly motioned for the guard to allow the man up. While they waited, Manderly had Ned take the head seat, as was proper for the higher-ranking lord. Normally if it was just them, Ned didn’t bother with such power plays.

It was not long before the guard returned with the merchant in question. The man was fairly tall, at least six feet, with dark skin and strange tattoos on his cheeks and forehead. He wore pants and tunic that looked to be cotton, and somewhat loose, with a patterned overcoat. Around his head was a wrap, hiding his hair from view. He also wore jewelry in the form of earrings and one or two rings, though he was definitely not the most ornamented male Ned had ever seen. Still the total picture was strange for the North.

The man let his dark eyes travel on the men in the room before they seemed to hone in on Ned, clearly recognizing him as the most important one there. He bowed to Ned respectfully.

“You must be Lord Stark,” the man spoke in a sharp accent, though his Westrosi was quite good. “I thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I am Shandu Khan, son of Myandu.”

“Greetings Master Khan,” Ned returned politely. “I am indeed Lord Stark. The man to my left is Lord Manderly, along with his son and steward. I must admit I am very curious as to why a merchant from Santh would wish to meet with me.”

“Yes, it is not usual for one of my people to travel this far north in Westeros,” Khan agreed readily. “However I have come for two reasons. One is to propose a trade between our two peoples that I hope will be beneficial for both. The other is to deliver letters from a young man to his siblings.”
“This young man’s name,” Ned queried as calmly as he could, barely suppressing a twitch of anticipation.

“He asked us to call him Jon,” Khan informed them with a slight grin. “He gave no other name, though he shares many of your features my lord. I cannot tell you how he is now, for it has been many moons since I have seen the young man, but he was well when last we spoke. In fact it was he who suggested I try my luck in the north.”

Ned allowed some relief to flood him at his words. Though he would forever be worrying for the boy, and given the time frame it took for letters to travel he would likely never know of his immediate wellbeing, at least he could get some news.

“I thank you for what knowledge you can give me on Jon. His siblings will be grateful as well. Though I do wonder what he thought either of our territories could offer the other,” he stated politely, honestly curious.

The man chuckled. “Yes, I had the same thoughts. I met young Jon when he saved my boys from a very unfortunate accident. They unwisely thought to play among the crabbing pots along the docs.”

That meant nothing to Ned, but Manderly’s snort and understanding look showed it had indeed been a bad decision on their part.

“I would likely be without my two sons if young Jon had not come to their aid. To repay his kindness I invited him to my home. It was there my oldest son noticed his blade,” Khan explained. “It was unlike any metal we have seen in the east. Though nothing can beat Valyrian steel, this metal is much sturdier than what we have been able to produce with our own ores. Jon explained it was made of northern steel, which is very strong and lasts for many years if kept properly. Most of the tools we have managed to make break within a few years, so you can imagine our interest in such superior ore. While trading for the ore would be helpful, I was unsure if there would be enough to make it worthwhile, as was young Jon. Then he noticed one of the plants we use for cooking as well as healing remedies. He asked why we used a weed for such things. This was very surprising to us, as this plant is extremely hard to get given it grows high in the mountains, and is considered a rare delicacy to our people. We call it Culluna, but your people know it as Heather.”

“Heather,” Manderly’s son asked incredulously. “Aye, we do consider it a weed. Grows all over the place.”

The man smiled brightly. “That is what young Jon said. Coupling the prospect of northern steel and heather both, then I could see where trade with the north might be a benefit. But what to trade? We peppered the boy for any ideas. We asked about spice, cloth and even dried meats, yet he said those would likely not prove enticing enough.” The man sighed sadly, before he brightened. Truly he could have been an actor for the performance he gave telling this story. “Then once more your son noticed something that we would never have considered. You see we have a product that is very common for us, and in fact is considered rather useless. We often throw more of it away than we use. Young Jon however was amazed to learn of such, shocked we had no idea of its true value.”

“And what is this product,” the steward demanded impatiently, clearly tired of this story.

The man reached inside his coat and pulled out an oblong object. He moved forward placing it gently on the table before them. “Glass.”

Ned’s features froze so as not to give anything away. Glass was indeed very valuable in the north. He would love to have more to build glass houses in near all of his lords’ keeps, but the merchants of Myr kept the price tag larger than they could afford. This man was not from Myr, he was from Santh,
and they had so much glass they ‘threw it away’. It also appeared they were not looking for gold, but to trade actual goods, both of which the north did have in abundance.

“Jon drew a picture for us, explaining about glass houses and how they are made along with their size,” Khan continued once he saw they had absorbed his announcement. “The amount of glass needed for one is easily obtained, as is making the glass into sheets, which can actually helped create more jobs for our people. I have brought enough glass with me for two of your glass houses. Are you interested in discussing a trade agreement?”

Ned didn’t even need to think about it. “Indeed Master Khan, we are very interested.”
The trade agreement had been hammered out and the glass had been inspected. Ned and Manderly had sent out some servants to carefully harvest a few crates of heather and Ned had sent a raven to Winterfell requesting Rodrick to prepare a load of northern ore to be shipped down to White Harbor. This would be the beginning of a very fruitful arrangement for both parties, especially given the quality of the glass presented. Really when Ned saw Jon again he would have to get the boy some kind of gift to thank him for setting this all up. This trade deal would benefit the entire north for years to come.

As Master Khan had also delivered Jon’s letters, Ned had requested a private dinner for his family in the guest solar Manderly had provided for his use. His banner man was more than happy to do so for him, genuinely hoping the news they received from Jon was good.

Ned greeted his children, and Maester Luwin happily that evening at dinner. It appeared Septa Mordane had retired early.

“You seem quite cheerful milord,” Luwin commented in bemusement. “I cannot imagine the books Manderly keeps having changed that much.”

“They did not,” he replied with a smirk, taking a drink of ale the servants had provided. Once the food was on the table and the pitchers left as well he motioned the servants to leave, making sure they were alone. “We received a visitor today from Santh, and procured a rather profitable deal for the north.”

All of them turned to him in curiosity except for Rickon, who didn’t care for things such as business.

“What deal,” Robb asked.

“Where’s Santh,” Arya chimed in.

“Who was the guest,” Sansa queried politely.

Ned held his hand up to stave off any other questions. “Santha is a port city in Essos, our guest was a merchant, Master Khan, and we now have the ability to trade northern goods for quality glass to make more glass gardens.”

“Truly milord,” Luwin gasped in surprise, knowing how precious glass was for them. “Better than Myr?”

“Indeed. We inspected the glass this afternoon,” he explained. He went on to detail the agreement, which he noted had lost Arya and Sansa’s attention, though the latter tried to politely listen. Robb made sure to stay attentive, though even his eyes glazed a bit, but Bran was truly interested in the workings of the agreement.

When he finished Luwin looked quite stunned. “That is an amazing deal, especially if the quality is as you say. But how did this merchant know about how prominent heather is here, or northern ore? Forgive me for saying, but the north is not known for trade.”

“No it is not,” Ned chuckled in agreement. “Master Khan received the knowledge of our particular merchandise first hand, from Jon.”

That had all of his children turning to him immediately. Before they could start demanding answers
he pulled out a new stack of bundled letters. “Master Khan was also kind enough to bring the next batch of Jon’s correspondence, which we will read after dinner.” Here he eyed his children sternly. “You will not rush dinner either, and we will wait because the letters appear to also have more drawings and we would not want them ruined with spilled food or drink.”

Nearly all of them groaned but complied with their father’s demand. Granted they did eat a bit faster than normal, and they certainly kept the bickering to a minimal, too afraid to let anything hinder their ability to listen to the letters. More than one of them would glance his way to see if they could finally consider dinner over, but Ned was enjoying the little bit of torture. However, he did relent sooner then he could have, if only because he too wanted to hear more about Jon.

“Come,” he instructed his children. “Let’s adjourn by the fire, you’re welcome to join us as well Maester Luwin.”

The children nearly ran to find a place to sit and get comfortable, leaving two of the chairs open for Ned and the maester, who followed his lord closely. Pulling the first letter out Ned noted the date, making sure it was indeed the one to start with.

“Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

I hope this letter finds you all well, and our family still healthy and whole. Not much has occurred since my last letter to you, yet I feel as if years have passed and I have changed irrevocably.

If I remember correctly my last letter detailed the storm we survived and our clean up progress. It was during the night after our third day working on the ships that it happened. Pirates attacked us. Our lookout was not able to see them properly due to the lighting, and the man on the other ship had fallen asleep. This was nearly our downfall. Thankfully another man had gone up to get air, tried of sleeping down in the haul and he managed to raise the alarm.

It was a brutal fight. I could barely tell up from down or who was who. Before you worry I was not injured aside from a few bruises. I did however kill two men that night.

One was in self-defense and the other was in the defense of another man. I never truly understood father and Ser Rodrick’s lessons until this moment. I had thought sometimes the endless drills were really to rid us of our energy or to keep us out of trouble. In truth it was the only reason I was able to react and fight back. I had nearly frozen with fear, but the lessons were so ingrained I just reacted. Others were not so lucky.

I also understand now why father always says that taking a man’s life is no easy thing. Even though it was in battle, and I know in my heart I was not wrong to fight back, I felt sick at taking their lives. It is not like an insult that can be taken back or a small injury an apology will sooth. These men will never again walk in the light of day or see those that they considered special to them, and I am the reason for that. It is not a pleasant feeling at all.

Zee said that it was okay to feel this way and that he was glad for it. He said if a person finds it easy to take a life, then they have no true respect for life and ultimately no respect for laws. One must always remember the value of a life or they could become a monster in the form of a man. Even Bronn agreed with this, which shocked me greatly. I had thought as a sellsword he would not care about the lives of others. Yet he said most sell swords enjoy a good fight, but unless it’s necessary they don’t like taking the lives of others. They get paid to fight or protect someone, not to kill. Those that get paid to kill are assassins and have no care for other people, and there are some that just like killing for the sheer pleasure. As long as I don’t become either then I’ll have done good with my life.

I am not sure I fully understand what they have told me, but I do feel better knowing that I found no
pleasure in taking another life. I hope none of you ever have to go through this, however, should you, remember that you should never enjoy it, but do not feel guilty in protecting yourself or others.

I apologize if that was a rather sour beginning to my letter, yet I needed to get that out and I know I can trust you three with my secrets.

On a lighter note, the man I saved was heading north past Winterfell, his name is Tabolt. He promised to give you the first batch of letters for me. I do hope he managed to meet with you and not cause too much of a ruckus. He claims he is traveling to see his sister and her family, though I am not too sure that is his exact purpose in the north.

After the attack we had another three days of repairs and then funerals for the fallen men, before we were able to set off back on course. The captain wasn’t happy about the delay, yet he never let his anger about it take over. Granted he was far grumpier than normal.

I also got to see those large fish the other men were telling me about. They are called Phins. They are sleek and grey with white underbellies. They swam in the waves made by the ship, sometimes jumping out of the water as if to dance in air. I actually got to see one up close, though not by choice. Cobb, one of the men, dropped a part of the rigging overboard. Thinking it’d be a great opportunity to teach me how to swim in deep water, he tossed me after it into the water. (Stop laughing! It was not that funny! I thought the Phins were going to eat me at first!) It also didn’t help that the water was particularly cold, though nowhere near as cold as the streams in the north. Just as I had grabbed onto the rigging I felt a nudge on my side. My heart about bumped out of my chest when I turned and saw one of the creatures swimming right next to me, it’s head out of the water and it’s eyes on me. It made a strange squeaking sound and its mouth/nose startled to nuzzle against me. It took a minute for any courage to return, but I did manage to pet the creature, which was surprisingly smooth and soft to the touch. It seemed to like me as it continued making the noises and nudging against me. A few others even joined in. I might have stayed with them longer had the captain not yelled at me to stop playing with the Phins and get back on the ship.

The rest of the crew just thought it was hilarious, and japed how I must be part fish the way the sea creatures took so kindly to me. They even told me to watch out because a mermaid would likely snatch me in a heartbeat if they had been around. (Those are mythical creatures that have the body of women with the tail of a fish instead of legs. The men claim they lure sailors off ships to get to know them. Some men come back, some don’t. I asked why it was bad if they wanted to get to know someone but they all just burst out laughing. I feel as if I am once again missing something.) Zee said it was a good sign though when the Phins like a person. They are apparently good judges of character.

I drew some pictures of them for you to show you what Phins look like. I don’t know too much more about them, but perhaps Maester Luwin has a book about them?

Again, I am sorry for the dreary start to this letter. I hope my tale about the Phins at least brought a smile to your faces.

I love you all and miss you,

Jon”

Ned easily handed over the pictures of the Phins, one clearly from Jon’s point of view when he was in the water. While the children eagerly remarked over each drawing Ned kept thinking back to the first part of the letter. Jon had confirmed he had been forced to kill. The first kill is never an easy thing, and Ned felt awful for not being there for the boy to help him through the confusing emotions that always happened. He was grateful to this Zee, who seemed to have taken on the role of mentor
to Jon, though he would have preferred this Bronn not insinuate himself so much into Jon’s education. Thankfully the sellsword wasn’t the type of man who relished in killing, as some of them were. Gods knew Jon didn’t need that kind of person in his life.

He also couldn’t help but think that if Jon had only stayed he’d never have been in that situation to begin with. The child had not even reached his twelfth name day by the time this fight had to have occurred. The reminder that some men do in fact freeze during a fight was a chilling prospect. He owed Rodrick a great thanks for drilling the boys to the point that the reaction to defend themselves when attacked was so ingrained.

“Father?” Broken from his thoughts Ned turned to see his eldest son standing next to him, his eyes worried.

“Yes Robb,” he replied just as quietly, as the boy clearly did not want the others to overhear.

“Is that really what it is like,” he questioned hesitantly. “When you make your first kill?”

“Sometimes,” Ned admitted. “Sometimes it is much worse, depending on the circumstance of the event. Regardless how it occurs, it is a heavy thing to bear.”

“Theon…” Robb paused, keeping an eye on the others to make sure they did not hear him. “Theon always talked about how killing someone felt good, especially if they were an enemy… But… but Jon didn’t think so, and neither did the men he sails with, not even the sellsword…”

Ned could understand the boy’s confusion. “First off, Theon has not had his first kill, nor has he been in a true battle,” Ned explained gently. “Secondly, the Iron Born are taught early to not care about other people but their own. It is why they have no problem reeving, pillaging and raping. Theirs is a culture based on taking things and people from others, and never caring for the consequences. For all that Theon has lived with us six years now, he still clings to the beliefs he was taught by his family. Those beliefs might change when he finds himself in the same situation as Jon, but one never knows for sure. Some men, once they have their first kill, thirst for it like a man in the dessert thirsts for water. It is why we have laws against such things to protect others from those type of men and women. It is also why here in the north, the man that passes judgment must swing the sword. You need to respect and understand the value of any life you take, for you must carry that burden with you for the rest of yours.”

He could see his words and Jon’s were having an effect on his son. So Ned let him be to give him time to think it through. If he had more questions he would come to him.
“What does the next one say,” Arya demanded pulling him from his musing.

“Well, let’s see,” he replied with a chuckle, pulling the next letter out. He could see a few drawings with this one as well, the first one he actually knew. “It looks like he has made it to Braavos. See here, this is the sentinel that guards the entrance to the city.” He showed them the beautifully done rendition of the large statue and the port city. It was almost as if Ned was looking at it firsthand.

“He writes…

Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

We have finally made it to the ship’s first destination. Given the length of time I feel it is okay to reveal my position. I am now in the city of Braavos. The statue in the drawing is indeed as large as depicted. It stands over the two cliffs like a giant just waiting for his enemy. All ships going too or from the port must pass under this massive sentinel. Sadly my drawing doesn’t do it any justice. Mayhap one day you will come see it for yourselves to experience the sheer enormity of the structure.

The docks and city are fairly typical, though far more overwhelming than Wintertown. It is also a bit dirtier here, with waste being thrown out into the streets. The homes are also close together and some right on top of each other. There is a difference in the sections of town, clearly showing which families have money and which do not. There is also a feel of history here, not quite like at Winterfell, but still present. You can see it in the architecture and the people themselves.

Down by the docks there is a huge market for selling all sorts of goods, mostly fish granted, but also silks, grain, pottery and so much more. I think Sansa would love some of the dresses the women here wear. They are bright and colorful with embroidered trims. (I admit I did sketch a few of them out for her, so if you’d slip them under her door I’d appreciate it. As long as you don’t tell her they’re from me, she should accept them.) Even the men wear such clothing, though a few are more practical and have leather on.

The captain allowed us to have ‘shore leave’ for the week. This means we get to leave the ship to do what we want. Some of the men are getting off here, looking for other work. I have yet to decide, but I could sail to our next destination of Santh, if I so choose. I know Zee will be sailing again, so maybe. Right now I plan to explore the town and maybe earn some coin with my drawings. A few of the men remarked that the wealthier citizens would pay good coin for portraits. As I will need all I can get, it is a good place to start.

Luckily I am now rid of Bronn. The sellsword has left to see his client back to his home, then plans to meet up with the Second Sons, the main group of sellswords he belongs to. Part of me is sad to see him go, but the larger part is rather relieved. I have learned a lot from the man, yet I fear if I stay too long with him I shall pick up some terrible habits. I also dislike how he always ruffles my hair, like I’m some small child.

This first day I just wandered around checking out the sites. The city really is so very different from home. Most of the buildings are made of a hard clay, painted white to keep them cool in the hot sun. They also have clay tiles on the roofs. The roads are all cobblestone and near constantly filled with people. Some roads though are actual waterways leading to and from the port. People use small boats to traverse these areas. I even passed some of the guards talking to various sellswords. Seeing their armor was interesting, as it is not nearly as restrictive looking as ours in the north. Of course it is also
much hotter here, so perhaps it is to keep them from becoming overheated.

Most of the people left me alone, used to foreigners coming in and out, but I did have one strange meeting. I was heading back to the docks when I noticed a rather large building in the distance. The size of it seemed strange as it was off on its own and had no guards that I could see. The only color was on the two doors, one black and the other white. I must have wondered about it aloud for a man answered me. He seemed to appear out of nowhere! He told me it was the House of Black and White. Apparently that is where the Faceless men reside. They are a group of very dangerous people, so do not go there if possible.

The man though kept speaking, his eyes dark and looking into mine far too intensely to be honest. He kept saying that it was a place for No One, however I could not go there. I asked why and he just smiled and said, ‘You cannot be No One, for a boy has more names than he knows, and one of those names is destined to be known.’

I wanted to ask him what he meant by that, however I got distracted by some merchants. I turned away for less than a second! When I turned back the man was gone! There was no trace of him anywhere! It was a very unnerving experience.

After that I made my way back to the inn where most of the sailors were staying. I managed to finagle a cheaper room by agreeing to do work in the kitchens, mostly washing dishes. Not the best work, but it will help me save coin and fill my belly so beggars can’t be choosers.

Hopefully I will have more for you in my next letter. Until next time, remember I love you all and keep watching over our family for me.

Love,

Jon.”

Ned passed out the extra pictures, showing different aspects of Braavos, and the pictures drawn for Sansa went to her, where she held them with a strange sort of reverence. Likely she had not thought Jon would think of her while he was away. He also noticed she’d been a bit hurt about his comment on her not accepting them had she known they came from him, yet everyone knew the Sansa of before likely wouldn’t have.

While he was grateful Jon had made it to a city and off the ocean, he was disturbed by the interest that man had taken in Jon. Given the speech patterns Jon depicted the man was likely one of the Faceless men. Jon had been right to warn his siblings, these men and women were very dangerous assassins. What really got him was the mention of Jon having more than one name. Did the Faceless men know the truth? If so how had they come to learn of it? Had they told anyone else?

Thank the gods they didn’t want Jon to be a member of their cult. At least he knew Jon had moved on to Santh, so he would not be near that place for too long.

Deciding to move on, he grabbed the next letter. Pulling the drawings out from under it he froze. The very first picture was of Jon, he knew it to be so, but he was missing his hair. Never before had Jon so resembled his sire. With his dark curls and eyes it was easy to miss those features passed down from the Targaryen line. Without them… without them Jon could be in danger.

“What’s wrong father,” Bran asked coming over to take a peek at the page. He let out a laugh as he saw the picture. “It’s Jon! With no hair!”

“What? Let me see,” Arya demanded, bursting into giggles when Bran showed the portrait with
flourish.

All of his children were laughing at the strange sight of Jon without his curls. Maester Luwin had joined in the laughing until he got a good look at the drawing. His eyes narrowed a bit to study it closer then grew wide with realization. When his eyes found Ned’s the Lord of Winterfell shook his head sharply. The Maester nodded, understanding that now was not the time or the place for any kind of discussion. Ned made a note to hide this picture if he could not destroy it all together.

“Why would he cut his hair,” Sansa lamented. “It was so nice!”

“His head looks like an egg,” Robb snorted in mirth.

“Egg,” Rickon echoed, nodding seriously at the depiction.

“Well at least we know he hasn’t change that much,” Arya remarked thoughtfully. “No one else can pout like that!”

That brought on some more laughter, even managing to draw a chuckle from Ned. It was true, Jon did have a penchant for pouting. Clearing his throat to get their attention he turned back to the letter.

“Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

No doubt you have already seen the first picture and can guess how the past few days have gone. (Do stop laughing!) Braavos is not only teaming with people, but with lice as well. I was disgusted to wake up after the first night to a horrendous itch in my scalp. The others seemed to think it was normal, which Zee informed it was as the men didn’t care if they had lice or not. I however will not stand for such. Sadly they only laughed when I requested a bath and soap. No, they decided the only way to get rid of the infestation was to shave my head! I look ridiculous!

Hodges said it made me look less cute and more menacing, or as menacing as a puppy can get. If I wasn’t afraid I’d catch some disease, I’d have bitten him for the comment. The others just kept rubbing my now fuzzy head, telling me to cheer up. But how can I? I have no hair!

At least the bar maids were sympathetic and gave me some ointment to help with the shave burn. They also gave me a plain red scarf to cover my head to help protect it from the sun. I do not want to know what the skin on top of my head feels like burned. Still, I can’t believe they did that! They have no decency! All I wanted was to wash my hair to get rid of the lice, but NO they had to abuse my person and steal my hair! They are evil, evil men! I have refused to speak to any of them for the past two days. Not that they care.

I would like nothing more than to hide away, but sadly I must go out to try and earn some coin. I managed to scrounge together some supplies and headed to one of the busier streets. There I attracted a few patrons, mostly women at first, trying to be kind to the little orphan. I think they did not expect much from my drawings, but I pleasantly surprised them. In fact they sent a few people my way to complete portraits. One man, a rather wealthy one, even brought his own paper for me to work on, as it was much better quality than what I have. Still, he seemed very pleased by my ability and gave me two silver stags more than I was charging.

The next day I had even more patrons, which was nice. One even asked me for a scape of the port. It was nice to be appreciated for something I can make on my own. I also received good pay for my drawings. Perhaps I have found my calling?

One of my patrons was rather funny. His name was Oz, or so he said. He asked for a portrait then told me funny stories about his training. Apparently he is a soldier of some type, though he would
not tell me whom he worked for. That’s okay though, I have learned that sometimes it is best not to ask questions. He really liked talking about someone called Rhae, who used to play the harp. Sometimes though he’d ask me questions about where I was from. I told him a bit about the north, but not our family. I don’t want word to get out that I am father’s son. I worry an enemy might try to use me against our family, even if I am just a bastard. They would know father would be too honorable to not help me.

This brings me to a very important request. I know you will not like it, but I am going to ask it in any case.

If anyone tries to use me against father or our family you need to make sure father does not call banners or go to war for me. I am not worth it. No, don’t argue, it is the truth. Robb, Sansa and the rest of you are father’s true children, not me. I do not want any of you hurt for me, ever. So I am trusting you to make sure our family doesn’t do anything foolish should I befall some foul plot. Know that if anyone takes me, I will make sure they cannot use me, by any means. So any letters they send will be meaningless anyway.

“What does he mean by that,” Arya interrupted him, her grey eyes wide with concern. “What does he mean by any means?”

Before Ned could answer it was Robb who spoke. “He means that he will try to escape, but if he can’t then he would end his life before he let anyone use him against us.”

Sansa, Bran and Arya gasped causing Rickon to frown at them. Maester Luwin looked severe but did not counter Robb, neither did Ned. He could not argue her words, because he knew them to be true, as much as the thought left him feeling sick inside. Did Jon truly think he meant so little? While he was not Ned’s trueborn son, he was his family. Ned would do anything within his power to save his family. But… Jon didn’t know that, did he? He thought he was just a bastard, who was lucky enough his ‘father’ bothered to take him in. He had no idea what Ned would do… had done to keep the last living part of his sister safe.

“No,” Arya growled fiercely. “I don’t accept that! Jon would never…”

“If it meant protecting our family, he would,” Robb told her solemnly, his eyes distant and sad. “Because Jon will always put family first, even if we don’t deserve it.”

Before Arya or Bran could protest more Ned cut them off. “While it is a worry, Jon is a very skilled young man, and I do not have any enemies that would think to use him against me. Most would never consider using a baseborn as a bargaining chip. Besides, Jon has proven himself resourceful, so I doubt he would allow himself to be captured in the first place.” Those words seemed to settle his children some, bringing a little comfort. Deciding to let the subject drop for now he pushed on.

“I doubt it’s an issue in any case. I have been very careful to keep my identity a secret. Actually, I kind of like it this way. It’s very freeing to be just Jon. No expectations, no pre-conceived notions. I am judged by my own actions and merits, as it should be for any man or woman.

Even you will be judged simply for having the Stark name. It is not easy and people will expect even more of you the older you get. That is why you must remember to be true to yourselves and your family. Don’t let others put you into a box just because you carry a noble name or something is ‘expected’. Not to say you can completely buck the system (yes Arya I am looking at you.) but you can work around it.

On a lighter note, once I was done drawing for the day and completing the chores at the Inn I managed to learn some card games from a few of the other sailors. Most are based on matching pairs,
or having higher numbers. They also told interesting stories that sadly I cannot tell you, as they are a bit too old for your ears. Yes, I know, it is not fair I tell you such, as I am still technically a child, yet I will hold to the decision all the same.

Strangely Master Oz was at the inn this evening with a friend of his, a tall man named Art. He seemed far more severe than Oz, and certainly didn’t join in the merriment with the rest of the men. I caught him staring at me a lot, which made me uneasy. Thankfully they left before closing. I only have a few more days here before the captain plans to sail off. Though I am doing well with my drawings, I think I shall try my luck in Santh as well. Might as well see more of Essos right?

Stay strong my little wolf pack; remember to watch out for the rest of them too.

Love always,

Jon.

Ned took out the other pictures showing little sketches of some of the people Jon had met, and some scenes of the street he’d been on. A few were of the inn he was staying at from the looks of it. The way he captured the people in motion or mid-action was fascinating. Ned could almost imagine being there in person. Some of them even had names, and more than one drawing was of Zee, the man who kept a lookout for Jon. His children had fun looking over the people now in Jon’s life and trying to come up with their ‘story’.

It was the last one though that almost had his blood freeze. It was a rendition of two men at a table, their clothes were plain and almost nothing about them was remarkable. Except both men sat in such a fashion indicating they were clearly fighters. The names of Oz and Art next to each man identified them, and as Jon had thought Oz was a soldier the postures should have been no surprise. No, it was the faces of the men that left him startled. He knew them very well, having seen them more than once in his dreams.

They were another lie he had told all those years ago. One he prayed would never come back to him. Everyone thought they were dead, and he should have killed them instead of leaving them knocked out and wounded. However, he couldn’t kill two wounded men for doing their duty, not after he found Lya. When they seemed to have disappeared he thanked the gods every day, hoping the truth would remain secret for far longer.

But now it seemed the truth was closer to coming out than ever before. And he would not be there to protect Jon from the harsh reality of it when he found out.

He dearly hoped the two men in the picture would do that for him. Would protect Jon where Ned no longer could. After all, Ser Arthur Dayne and Ser Oswell Whent of the Kingsguard had never broken their vows to protect the true Targaryen King.
chapter 12 Letter

“Letter!” Rickon’s loud bellow woke Ned up from his contemplation. He made sure to discretely slip the one drawing to the side. Clearly his youngest was not going to be patient.

“Alright little one, we’ll keep going,” he told his child, tweaking the boy’s nose to earn a few giggles. The next letter didn’t have any drawing with it.

“Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

Tonight is my last night in Braavos, for a time at least. The captain plans to sail in the morning and I have agreed to stay on until Santh. I have the strangest feeling that it is where I need to go next. I am unsure if I will continue with them after that or try traveling the great desert. Mayhap I will find a Dothraki Horde to join? I jape; I would not join them. From what I understand they do not like outsiders.

The last few days have been very busy. Not only with my side jobs but with training as well. As I have said before I am clearly cursed. The very morning after the last letter I penned Bronn came swaggering into the inn as if he owned it. The moment his eyes landed on me he started grinning, rather maniacally in my opinion. Before I could utter any form of greeting, polite or otherwise, he swept me up and out of the place. (Yes, he threw me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes! I was not amused!) I tried to get away but his grip was quite strong.

When he finally did release me, after spending the entire trip lamenting the loss of my hair, (I don’t see why he cared so much) I found myself in a training yard with several other people. Master Oz and Master Art were even there, speaking to a larger burley old man. He reminded me a bit of Ser Rodrick, and I knew immediately he was not one to anger. Apparently though Bronn had brought me to prove a point to another member of his sellsword group.

That’s right, he brought me to the training center of the Second Sons. It seems one of his… colleagues made a comment about him not being able to train anyone. So he decided to find me and pit me against the other man’s squire. I, of course, tried to protest, not that it did much good. Sadly Bronn was not having it and pushed me into the ring. I had planned to just walk out of there, Bronn’s pride be damned; however, it didn’t quite work out.

As stated previously I have been working on controlling my temper. For the most part I have had success. This time… not so much. I will say though I did not throw the first strike. This time I used my words instead of my fists, when the other offered insult. I will not tell you what was said, for I fear you may repeat it and then face father and Lady Stark’s wrath. It was not polite in the least. In any case, I angered the other boy more and he attacked. I managed to roll away and grab one of the discarded weapons. It was a fairly quick fight, as even Theon could beat this fool. His movements were jerky and his footwork atrocious. I truly think it was one of the fastest spars I have ever participated in.

Next thing I know the boy is unarmed in the dirt, Bronn is gloating and the rest of the yard was dead silent. Needless to say I did not like the attention this had drawn to me. (Stupid Bronn!) So I tried to leave once again, only this time it was Master Art that stopped me. He asked if it was true that Bronn taught me, and I did have to grudgingly admit the man had shown me some of the moves used. Then Master Art asked me to spar against him. Well he actually said, ‘then shall we see how you fair against a real fighter’. You should have seen Bronn’s face at the remark. I had actually planned to decline; this man is clearly a fighter. You can tell just by the way he walks. (In fact talk to Ser Rodrick, he can help you point out little tells from people that show if they are skilled in combat.)
Once again though, Bronn decided to sacrifice me for his honor. (I really think I should shave his head in recompense. Or perhaps put fleas in his leggings…)

I can honestly say I have NEVER seen a man fight like this. He was pure motion. The sword he handled seemed to weigh nothing the way he wielded it. He kept me completely on the defensive and it was all I could do to block or dodge some of his strikes. And I know he was taking it easy on me. The few times I actually managed to swing back he deflected as if swatting away a fly. Fighting this man certainly destroyed any confidence I had in my sword skills.

In truth, I know I am good for my age, but my ability isn’t even a fraction of what Master Art showed. It was very humbling. (Maybe I should send him to fight Theon and Robb; that might bring those two down to earth. It would certainly improve their skills.)

It didn’t take long for me to end up on my back, disarmed with the point of his sword at my throat. I couldn’t even think to be mad about it I was so amazed by his skills.

I fully expected laughter or ribbing from the others, like I got when I had my backside handed to me training with the guards. Instead some of them actually clapped! One even congratulated me on lasting so long against Master Art. When I pointed out it was only because he was holding back that I managed such a feat they just seemed more impressed. I don’t know why. I only pointed out obvious things. Master Art said I did well though, even if he told Bronn that there was no way he had taught me, for my style was too clean.

Master Oz just laughed and rubbed my head (I am starting to see why the two of you (Arya and Bran) dislike it so much and I promise not to do so to you again if we ever meet up.) He then asked if I wanted to join, and Bronn started yelling about how he found me first! Honestly! I am not an object to be bartered! In case you were wondering I did turn them down. I have already signed on with the captain and I won’t go back on my word.

Remember you should never break your word unless it is for VERY good reasons, like saving someone’s life. Your word is how people will judge if you are reliable or not. If you give your word only to break it, people will not trust you.

Thankfully the men there dropped the idea of me joining when I told them I had already signed on to sail to Santh. Some even seemed to respect the fact I would not go back on my agreement with the captain. It is strange to think that sellswords have such strong sense of honor, when I have learned all my life it was the opposite. Some of them really are good men. I’m still not joining them though. I want to try and be more than a sellsword. Besides, if I fight I want it to be for something I believe in, not something I’m being paid for.

I need to go. I have a few chores left before I can take a bath and prepare for the morrow. I will write you as soon as I can. I am actually very excited to see Santh. I do not think any of our ancestors have come this far east. I promise to draw more pictures so you can see it too.

Stay safe and stay strong.

Love,

Jon”

“That Bronn fellow is quite rude,” Sansa remarked tartly. “Why does he bother Jon so? Can he not see he does not enjoy his attention?”

His other children started nodding and Ned was going to answer, but Maester Luwin beat him to it.
“He sees something in Jon, likely his talent for sword play, and wants to cultivate it,” the old man advised them sagely. “After all it is an adult’s job to teach the next generation. Some people only want to teach those they feel are worthy of their time and skill. It is a very rewarding feeling to teach someone what you know and then to see them surpass you. It is more so for those who have no children of their own, for they get to choose who and when they pass their knowledge on.”

“Well couldn’t he just say that instead of dragging Jon all over the place,” Arya huffed indignantly.

“You’ll find most men do not like making such statements,” the maester countered with a grin. “Feels it makes them seem soft.”

“Still, I would have liked to see Jon fight that Master Art,” Bran chirped happily. “I have seen Jon in the yard with the guards and he is very good. Ser Rodrick was going to move him up to practice with the seasoned guards if he had stayed. Master Art must be really good if he made Jon feel like he was a beginner.”

“I suppose there is a lesson in that as well,” Ned mused thoughtfully. He knew just how good ‘Master Art’ really was, and for him to tell Jon he thought he did well was in fact a great compliment. Sadly he couldn’t inform his other children of that fact. “Just because you are good, or even the best at something, there is always someone out there that is better. This is why you should never become overconfident in your skills, it can hurt you in the end.”

Letting them chew on those words he pulled out the final letter. This one came with several drawings, including what looked to be the next set of instructions for the new fighting style he had sent to his youngest children with his first letters. Most of them were of a city he did not know, as well as a few people. Setting them aside for now he continued on.

“Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

It seems like an age since I last wrote to you. I have not had a chance until I reached our next destination. The crew was lighter than last time so we had double the duties from before, leaving little time for anything else. What time I did have was spent eating, sleeping or training. That’s right, the men still continued with teaching me various forms of fighting, especially Chin from Yi Ti. (I have included the next set of diagrams for the fighting style he is teaching me as I have finally progressed enough to learn them.)

The most surprising though is that Master Art and Oz have decided to travel to Santh with us and they are also adding to my training. Master Oz is helping work on my blocks, while Master Art is making me go through my footwork repeatedly. I had thought no one was as bad as Ser Rodrick about footwork, but I have been proven wrong. If I mess up even the tiniest bit, he makes me start again from the beginning.

I have gone to bed exhausted nearly every night from all the work I have been doing. Still, I do think I have been improving some. I have also noticed I have a much easier time navigating the ropes and decks of the ship. I even got to climb in the rigging of the topsail and stand in the crow’s nest. It was exhilarating to have the wind blowing in my hair and look down from such a height to see the water below. It was like standing on the tallest parapet in Winterfell and watching everyone in the yard, only the ‘floor’ moves. I find I rather enjoy the feeling, though I am not sure the life of a sailor is one I truly want.

The port of Santh was not nearly as ostentatious as Braavos. However, there were a good number of ships coming in and out. Zee said they were mostly fishermen and crabbers. Crabs are very strange water creatures that some people catch and boil to eat. I think they have some in White Harbor, but not to this magnitude. I drew some for you to show you how strange they looked, though they truly
are not bad tasting with a bit of salt. Hodges said he likes his with butter, but that is far too expensive for my purse. I will say the ale here is nowhere as good as home. It is often too watery. I suppose that is why they drink so much wine here instead. Sadly I find it too sweet to enjoy. And no, I have not gotten drunk, though Hodges and Cobb tried very hard to make it happen. I would not like to lose my wits in a place I am unfamiliar with even if I have come to trust some of the crew.

There is a lesson you should know. Be careful when someone tries to ply you with wine or ale, for they are more often than not waiting for you to loosen your lips and tell them your secrets. Always make sure to keep you wits about you, unless you are with those you can trust completely. Even then I would caution against it, as you’d likely find yourself pranked in the end. The older guards used to do all sorts of things to the younger guards that were too into their drink to notice. Some lost clothes, others had their hair cut funny, and once I heard poor Matthew ended up tied in the pig pin while he was passed out. And those were all done in good fun. Imagine if you lost your wits around people you couldn’t trust.

The rest of the food here tends to lean mostly towards seafood, though they do have some bread dishes that are nice and a strange grain called rice. It grows well in boggy areas. However they also seem to enjoy adding spices to their foods, some are so hot I feel as if my tongue will fall out. Master Oz thought it was amusing to have me try several of them, commenting on how some turned my face red or made my eyes water. I tried to stop the burn with water, but it was no good. Thankfully one of the local women took pity on me and gave me some goat’s milk. It stopped the burn immediately. After that I kept my food choices very bland.

Just like Braavos I have gotten work in the local inn and I have tried my hand at drawing portraits for the locals. I actually had a Dothraki warrior ask me to draw him in his battle gear with his horse! I was leery to at first, but I figured it shouldn’t be a problem, as he didn’t seem to be causing any trouble there. He was very pleased with the final picture and gave me a dagger for it, which is actually worth more than what I was asking.

I will say I find it strange that Master Art and Master Oz have been following me around, usually only one or the other. I asked them about it, but they just said they felt strange letting a young boy like me wander on my own. I told them I could take care of myself, but they always ignore me. I suppose I shouldn’t complain too much, they do keep some of the more undesirable people away. In fact, I have gotten several disturbing propositions from men and even a few women. (Do NOT tell Theon or Robb!) Apparently I have a very ‘exotic’ look.

Speaking of looks, my hair is finally growing back! It itches like crazy, but I finally have more than a bit of fuzz up there. It is a lighter brown than it had been, but I have been in the sun a lot. Zee says that hair sometimes lightens when in the constant sun on the sea. It is also really curly, and looks funny when brushed out, so I usually just leave it be.

I did meet one of the local merchants here. His name is master Khan. I saved his two boys when they decided to play by some crab pots on the dock. This is not wise as these pots are large structures made of wood and thin metal wire. There are a lot of sharp edges and if you get tangled in one and fall in the water you’re likely to drown. I almost witnessed this first hand, but thankfully I managed to get to them before this occurred. As a way to thank me Master Khan invited me to his home for dinner, though I told him it was not necessary. I would have helped the boys regardless, as it was the right thing to do. However, he insisted and it would have been rude not to join them. Plus the same feeling I had telling me I needed to come to Santh acted up again, insisting I go with this man. Like Old Nan said, you need to trust your gut, so I did.

His wife is an excellent cook. They had roasted lamb with grilled vegetables and some rice. It wasn’t over spiced either, like most of the food merchants like to do. It was from Master Khan that I learned
that Heather is a very rare and sought after herb. Can you imagine? Those weeds, that grow everywhere in the north, are actually considered a delicacy here. I was quite surprised.

Yet the biggest shock was finding out that glass is very common here. Apparently the desert sand is exactly what one needs to make glass, and when lightening strikes the sand they get all sorts of glass from it. This gave me a wonderful idea. I really hope it goes through for it will be a great boon to the north and Santh if it does. I suggested that Master Khan go treat with father, our heather and perhaps some other items for glass to build glass houses. This would be so much better than buying the glass from Myr. Plus father was always muttering about how more glass houses would help the north prepare for winter.

It seems my gut feelings are paying off. Now if only it would tell me what to do next. I am unsure of where I shall go after this. I do not feel any pull to keep sailing yet I am not sure where I should go next. Do I stay? Do I travel south or further east? Whatever I choose I am sure to have a good story for you all.

Master Khan has decided to try his luck with father; I do hope he finds the trade agreeable. I think he will, but at the same time I am not truly sure how he will feel about me telling a foreigner about some of the properties of the north. Still, for more glass houses to help with winter, I think it is worth the gamble.

At least I have someone to take these letters to you. I hope you all are well, and the rest of the pack. Remember to try hard in your lessons and to listen to your elders. But also have some fun.

I miss you all.

Love,

Jon.”

Ned passed around the different pictures, one of Khan and what he assumed were his family. He had even included a rough sketch of the Dothraki warrior he had worked for. The man certainly looked fierce. Though he would prefer Jon to avoid such characters all together, especially the ones who keep propositioning the boy. Honestly! He knew Jon was far more… delicate than most northerners, but it was clear he was still a child. It was despicable that adults would approach him for such things. He certainly hoped Dayne and Whent kept those lechers away from the boy. Jon had already had some of his innocence stolen when he had been forced to kill; he did not need to lose the rest of it so soon!

“Do you think we could try crab sometime,” Bran asked him, looking up from the picture showing the strange creatures.

“Crab,” Rickon cheered, pointing at the strange creatures on the page.

“Why? They seem so strange,” Sansa protested, wrinkling he nose up.

“That’s the point,” Arya scoffed. “They’re something we don’t normally eat. It’ll be like an adventure!”

“Is that why we found Jory and Gregor in the Wolfswood naked? Because they got drunk,” Robb blurted out suddenly.

Ned chuckled remembering that day well. “Aye. Rodrick told them to go easy on the ale, when they didn’t listen… well…”
“Did anything like that ever happen to you father,” Bran joined in on the new subject.

Ned flushed brightly remembering some of the shenanigans he and Robert had gotten up to in the Vale. “Not for a very long time. And before you ask, no I will not be telling you those stories.”

All of his children groaned, even Sansa. They enjoyed hearing stories from his youth for some strange reason.

“Enough of that. I do believe it is getting on time for bed,” he announced. “So hand me all the drawings back so they do not get lost. If you go to bed with little trouble, I will speak to Manderly tomorrow about possibly procuring some crabs for you to try.”

“Crab,” Rickon cried out again, waving his hands happily.

Robb swung the boy up into his arms and the others filed out after them as they made their way to the rooms they were using for this trip. It wasn’t long before only Ned and Maester Luwin remained, the former shuffling the letters and pictures into a more manageable pile.

“Maester Luwin,” Ned started yet couldn’t find the right words. Though it seemed he did not have to.

“Do not worry milord,” the man responded easily. “No one will hear a word about it from me. Though I do wonder why you did not share this with your wife?”

Ned sighed heavily. “I supposed because I was afraid if I told it to someone, even Catelyn, others would find out as well. But if I didn’t say anything then I could keep pretending it would never come to light,” he admitted tiredly.

“Might I offer some advice milord?” Ned looked at him curiously. “Truth has a nasty way of coming to light when we least expect it and rarely when it is welcome.”

The maester bid him goodnight, leaving Ned to his own thoughts.
chapter 13 Jon

Jon watched with a nostalgic feeling as Master Khan’s ship disappeared over the horizon. The man had decided to take Jon’s advice and was headed north to try his luck in trade. Jon hoped it went well and his father would accept the other man's proposal. The chance for glass houses should be very tempting, but sometimes it was hard to tell with his father. The north in general tended to be wary of those from south of its borders, let alone people not even from Westeros. He also hoped his father wasn’t angry with him for leaving as he had, though he knew the man would be disappointed.

His father and his youngest siblings would definitely not be happy with him, even if they had received his first letters. He really hoped Talbot had gotten them to his siblings. Granted he knew his father or even Lady Catelyn would know about them if they had gotten them. Hopefully it was his father, otherwise it was likely they were tossed before his siblings’ had a chance to read them. Gods how he missed them.

Even now he expected Arya to barge into his room followed by Bran, or Rickon to latch onto his leg demanding a story. He even missed seeing Sansa watching them with her lady-like air of disapproval when they played in the yard. He did not miss Robb’s comments or snide remarks, but he did miss the brother he’d been before Theon had come into their lives. For the longest time he’d thought it’d always be him and Robb against the world. Having that dream shattered in such a way hurt more than he would ever admit.

But surely they were all better off for him not being there. No doubt the tension of the house had eased with him no longer there to remind Lady Stark of his father’s one transgression. Maybe his siblings had also started to grow closer? He’d noticed the way Arya and Bran had started to distance themselves from Robb and Sansa. Likely Rickon would follow suit once he grew older. A rift between siblings would never end well, especially in the north, where family equaled survival.

True, he missed his lessons with Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrick, as well as seeing several other household servants. However, he couldn’t deny he was enjoying his time traveling and learning from different people. Zee and Chin had taught him various dialects of their countries, surprised at how easily he picked them up. Mister Gibbs taught him how to navigate day or night, with either charts or stars to guide you. The other sailors always had something new to teach him, even if it was a ridiculous story that couldn’t possibly be true. And he had learned a lot from Chin, Bronn and now Masters Oz and Art about different fighting techniques. Really he had lucked out in his companions so far.

Of course he would no longer have his shipmates as they had sailed on two days before, heading further east. The captain had told him he’d be welcome on his ship anytime should they cross paths again. Many of the other sailors wished him well and told him to look them up should he ever be in port when the Belladonna was docked. He really hoped he got the chance to do so.

For now he needed to figure out his next move. Turning away from the docks he headed back to the small inn he was staying in. Master Khan’s wife had offered to house him, but he felt that wouldn’t be right. He needed to earn his own way, and he had a good deal at the inn. Already he had saved enough coin to buy some supplies for whatever he chose to do next. Sure he could stay, perhaps find a stable job, but something told him this was not the end of his journey.

Much like in Winterfell he had been having some strange dreams. Unlike the crypts though, he started dreaming of a vast white land, where the snow fell constantly and the wind froze you to the bone. Occasionally he would see mammoths, and even giants, along with villages of people he could only assume were wildlings. Sometimes it felt like he was watching them through the eyes of a bird,
flying high in the sky, other times he was slinking through the land on fast feet, all sorts of smells assaulting his senses. He had even glimpsed the Wall, though he’d never seen it before in person. If not for his grandfather’s ghost warning him of the magic in their blood he’d have thought he was going insane.

Then there were the feelings. Strange tugs in his gut telling him where he needed to be. He’d felt it when he spotted the Belladonna the first time. Then again when the captain offered him to sign on until Santh. Once there he’d felt it upon meeting Master Khan. He had not felt it since Master Khan agreed to try and trade glass with the north. So perhaps something was guiding him where he was needed? Mayhap his ancestors were using him to find ways to help the north? After all glass houses would be extremely beneficial for the upcoming winter, especially if his grandfather was right about the Others.

Jon thought he might be. Sometimes his dreams grew very dark the farther north he went. There was a strange formation he would come upon, but he could see nothing past that. However, the dread that would fill him sometimes left him frozen in bed, even after waking.

Shaking his head to rid those thoughts he noticed one of his new shadows from the corner of his eye. Ever since Braavos and meeting Master Oz and Master Art the men had become interested in his welfare, though Jon couldn’t fathom why. One or both always seemed to be with him now, no matter where he went. After years of living as a bastard, often ignored by people, the constant watch left him unnerved.

At first he had thought it mere coincidence that they chose the Belladonna to travel to Santh, likely having to go there for business as sell swords. He was grateful for the time they took to teach him on the ship, even if he figured they were simply alleviating boredom. Yet when they reached their destination they had not gone off to conduct any business; instead they continued to stay near him. Granted he appreciated their presence, especially when some of the adults made rather embarrassing propositions. Honestly, he knew he had a slightly softer look than most northerners, but he was also still a child, technically. These people should have more decency than to offer… those types of things to him. He also was not expecting Essos to be as free as Dorne reportedly was in their preferences for partners. It left him more than a little disoriented really. It didn’t help that Master Oz had taken to teasing him about his ‘exotic’ appeal.

Reaching the inn he headed inside to one of the tables in the main dining area. Only a few men were scattered about, sailors from other ships, along with serving women moving to and fro. Miss Adlyn, a very pretty young woman who helped him with learning some of the local customs, smiled brightly at him indicating she’d be by with his normal food soon. She and her betrothed both worked at the inn, and were very kind to him when he first started working to help pay his way. Her betrothed, Juran, had taught him how to salt and smoke fish to keep it longer when he helped in the kitchen.

He spotted Master Oz at one of the back tables, looking rather rough this morning. Apparently he’d been up drinking with some of the sailors, ‘gathering information’ or so he calls it. Jon figured he just liked to drink with people and since Art wouldn’t, he had to find others who would join him. Sliding into one of the seats across from him, Art taking the other, Jon greeted Oz loudly, a slightly mischievous grin on his face. Ser Rodrick had always said it was okay to harass the fools who spent the night drinking; it helped teach them to employ moderation the next time.

“Ugh, why must you be so loud,” Oz groaned pitifully, not even lifting his head from his arms.

“I just wanted to make sure you were awake to enjoy this beautiful day,” Jon informed him happily, earning a chuckle from Art at his right.

“Evil child,” the other responded petulantly.
Miss Adlyn came by placing their usual breakfast on the table, smiling at Jon when he thanked her as he always did. He found it strange that people didn’t extend common courtesy to others, especially those serving people. It was the polite thing to do, and you often got treated better in return.

“Did you at least learn anything useful in your ‘information gathering,’” Art asked his friend dryly, starting on his meal of fish and bread.

Jon tuned them out as they spoke. It was not his place to hear what they were discussing as it likely had to do with their profession. Instead he pulled out the recently purchased map of Essos, looking it over thoughtfully as he munched on his own meal. He had to decide where to go next.

But Essos was a huge continent. There was so much to see, though many places would likely be easy to mark off. As interested in the Dothraki as he was, Jon knew it would be a bad idea to go into their lands. They had a tendency to capture outsiders and make them slaves. He could travel to Qohor to Pentos, but Pentos was very close to Westeros, and it was possible someone would recognize him and get word back to his father, or try to take him back. If his father had even bothered getting word out about him leaving. The king was his best friend, so he might have told the man and then the king would feel it his duty to send Jon back… No, that likely wouldn’t happen. No one cared what a bastard did, especially those in the southern part of Westeros. Still, perhaps it would be best to keep that city for another time. He could go south to Meereen, there were several cities nearby. Granted they all approved of slavery, even pitting slaves against each other in fighting rings, if what the sailors said was true. He didn’t know if he could go there and not help anyone in such a predicament. Yi Ti might be interesting, though getting there would be difficult, passing through the Red Waste would not be easy. Chin had also said most did not like outsiders there, and without someone to vouch for him it would not be wise. It was disappointing, as he would like to see more of Chin’s country. There was also Myr or Tyrosh, but they too were close to Westeros, and dealt a lot with Dorne, and the Dornish did not like northerners from what he understood. He didn’t know why they seemed to be adverse to Jon’s people and Maester Luwin couldn’t really articulate the issue, but best not to test it.

His eyes drifted down the map landing on Volantis and then the islands where Valyria used to reside. The same tug he’d felt before pulled viciously inside him. Why would he need to go there? It was a wasteland from what Maester Luwin said, a land considered cursed since the Doom occurred centuries ago. He had also heard rumors of people with greyscale going there, though Maester stated that was not true, as the citadel had found a treatment decades ago. Still…

Maybe there was something there to help in the war to come with the Others? Maybe… maybe there was something there about his mother’s family? No one knew who they were, or who she even was except his father and he had refused to even speak of her. Though there were whispers she had to have been of Valyrian descent given some of Jon’s features. Yet, that didn’t make any sense. No, there had to be another reason his gut was telling him to go there.

“Decided on a destination then,” Master Art queried breaking him from his thoughts.

It took Jon a moment to realize the two men had been watching him closely and he blushed a bit in embarrassment for not noticing before. “Um, yes… I think I will travel south towards Volantis, by way of Qohor.”

“Any reason,” Oz asked around his bread, tired eyes looking at Jon quizzically.

“Well.” Jon licked his lips thinking of how to explain it without sounding silly. “I’m not interested in going to the cities to the west, at least not at the moment. The ones further east and south all endorse slave fighting, and I would likely get into more trouble there not being comfortable with such things. Also Chin said Yi Ti doesn’t like outsiders unless they are introduced by one of their own, so I’d be
out of luck there. Volantis is supposed to be a great city, one of the last with Valyrian influence…”

“Didn’t think a child of the north would be interested in such things,” Oz commented wryly, though Jon thought he heard something else in his tone.

Jon just shrugged dismissively. “Most aren’t interested in leaving the north in general. So what does it matter if I am interested in seeing cities so different from the north?”

“It will be a long journey and not easy, especially as it is close to Dothraki territory,” Art mused, his purple eyes studying the map.

“True, but I am sure there are merchant caravans I can join,” Jon pointed out. “Plus one person traveling alone is less likely to draw any attention.”

Art raised a condescending brow while Oz snorted into his ale. “You are a boy of ten and two, you are not traveling alone,” the former told him in no uncertain terms.

“I appreciate the concern, but I have always planned to move on, and as I am alone it will have to be on my own,” Jon stated calmly. “I do not have the coin to hire any body guards, and I can’t keep you two from your business any longer. I am not sure why you have chosen to keep an eye on me, but surely you have better things to do. And as I said, I can find a merchant caravan and join them. I may be young but I’m not completely helpless or stupid.” The last bit was probably said a bit more petulantly than he should have allowed, especially given the looks he received in return. Still, this need to look after him had gone too far. Did they think he was the son of some rich lord only pretending to be poor? That he would hire them to protect and teach him?

“Right,” Oz declared, looking to Art. “We need to have ‘the Talk’."

Jon frowned in confusion as Art just nodded in agreement. What in the name of the old gods were they speaking of? Surely they were not referring to the discussion of the differences in males and females? He had heard it called ‘the Talk’ before by others, and Maester Luwin had given him the basics of what he needed to know.

“This will need to be done in private,” Art informed Jon seriously.

Jon was worried for a moment, yet as neither had given him reason not to trust them he would agree to this ‘talk’ for the time being. If it was what he thought then privacy would be preferred. Nodding his assent they rose from the table as a group and headed to the room the two men used in the inn, as it was bigger than the one Jon was supplied with. When they entered Art directed him to the properly made bed while he took up perch on the other. Oz leaned against the now closed door, which didn’t settle Jon all that much. He eyed them suspiciously.

“Is this about what happens between men and women? Because I may not know a lot but I know the basics,” he stated uncertainly, his cheeks burning from having to even bring it up.

Oz barked in laughter, nearly bending double with it while Art just shook his head, a small grin tugging at his lips. “No, this is not THAT talk.”

“Oh,” Jon muttered, even more embarrassed now.

Art waited until Oz got himself under control to start explaining the reason for this talk. “Jon what do you know of your parents?”

Jon blinked; he had not expected that. As he had not given any last name and he deflected any questions about family he had not expected anyone to ask. They should have assumed he was either
a bastard looking for a better life, or no longer wanted to associate with his family.

“Why does it matter,” he shot out instead, instantly more on guard.

Art studied him for a moment a wry smile coming out. “Fine, how about I tell you what you likely ‘know’ to be true.” Jon frowned at this but didn’t stop the man as he continued. “You, Jon Snow, were told that Lord Stark is your father and have no knowledge of your mother. You only know he brought you back from the rebellion and refuses to name your mother. However, he raised you with his trueborn children and educated you as he would do for any child with his blood.”

Jon felt the blood drain from his face. How could he know? Was this one of father’s enemies?

Art continued as if he did not see Jon’s distress. “I don’t know why you left, maybe one day you will tell us. I will say that Lord Stark is a very good man, more so than I originally gave him credit for. I met him twice, once at Harrenhall and later at the Tower of Joy.”

Dread swelled within Jon at those words. His mind whirl with the possibilities. But it couldn’t be true. Then again, Master Art, Master Oz? The amazing ability both men had displayed in fighting, especially Art. There were only two men they could be but father had said…

“That’s not possible. Father said you were slain,” he barely managed to voice through the lump in his throat.

“We were badly injured and unconscious when Lord Stark was finished, but he did not kill us,” Art (no, Arthur Dayne, his mind supplied) explained. “I do not pretend to know why, though I can guess it is because he spoke to his sister and she asked him to spare us. Perhaps it is because he could not kill an unarmed man. Regardless, we survived and made our way here to Essos.”

“So you recognized me as a member of the Stark family? And what? You plan to use me against them for vengeance,” he hissed angrily. “I won’t let you. Our family lost enough in the Rebellion.”

“It was not the Stark in you we recognized,” Oz (Oswell Whent, his mind once again provided) countered dryly, as if speaking of the weather. “We recognized your father’s side.”

“That makes no sense,” Jon argued, frowning in confusion. “My father is Lord Stark, how can you say what you said?”

“Because while you do carry the Stark blood it is not through Lord Stark,” Arthur pointed out. “Lord Stark lied to you, he lied to everybody.”

“How dare you,” Jon growled pushing to his feet as his temper flared. “I may be a bastard but…”

“You’re not,” Oswell cut in effectively stopping Jon’s tirade.

“What?” Jon had never felt so unbalanced.

“Your mother and father married under the Heart Tree on the Isle of Faces,” Arthur expounded. “Oswell and myself were witnesses as were Ser Gerold Hightower and Princess Elia. A Septon bound them. You are the trueborn son of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen.”

Jon gapped at him in disbelief, falling back to the bed, as his legs could no longer hold him. “But…”

“Lyanna and Rhaegar had fallen in love, Elia was aware of the affair and had no problem with Rhaegar marrying Lyanna as a second wife,” Arthur continued seemingly oblivious to the destruction his words wreaked on Jon’s world. “Rhaegar had wanted more children, but Elia’s health
would not allow it. Rhaegar was also hoping with the marriage to bring an alliance of the north to help usurp his father, who’d grown mad in his reign. They originally wed in secret to stop your grandfather from marrying her to Baratheon. Rhaegar then took her to the Tower of Joy at Elia’s behest while she returned to King’s Landing to try and keep the court from discovering what had occurred before we could put everything into play. Lyanna then sent a missive to her family to tell them the truth, only someone intercepted it and instead of relaying the truth, told your Uncle Brandon that Rhaeger had kidnapped Lyanna. This led to your uncle and then your grandfather coming to King’s Landing, and their unfortunate deaths at Aerys’ command. While Baratheon may have called banners to ‘save’ Lyanna, Lord Stark called them to keep the rest of his family and the north safe from Aerys. While I am sure your grandfather would have called banners for Lyanna, I do not think it would have escalated as it did had someone not incited your uncle’s wrath.”

“Who…”

“We are not sure, though we have some idea,” Oswell muttered angrily. “We have an ally looking into it. As of yet there is no proof, but there will be.”

“During this time Lyanna became pregnant with you.” Arthur redirected them back to the conversation. “Both she and Rhaegar were ecstatic, but Rhaegar had been called back to the Red Keep to command the army in response to Baratheon and his allies declaring war. Rhaegar tried to send Lord Stark several missives, but they too were never received. We think they were also intercepted. As such Rhaegar had no choice but to go to war. So he left myself, Oswell and Ser Gerold to protect your mother, his wife, and you, his unborn child. We had learned of the outcome of the battle of the Trident along with the sacking of King’s Landing and the death of your father and siblings. Lyanna had not yet given birth, which is why we stayed instead of heading to Dragonstone to join with the Queen and her son Viserys. Upon your birth you would be the rightful heir to the throne, which is why we stayed. The day you were born is the day your uncle found us.”

“He said… he found Lyanna covered in blood,” Jon muttered quietly, his mind whirling with the information. If what was said was true, then his whole life had been a lie…

“According to the maids that stayed Lyanna lost much blood bringing you into the world,” Arthur explained gently, his eyes sympathetic. “She also contracted the birthing fever. With no maester there to help her, she unfortunately perished.”

‘Because of me,’ Jon’s mind filled in the blank. His birth had killed his mother. His fath… uncle had taken her bones and him back to Winterfell. But… “Why? Why did he lie?”

“Because Baratheon is a cunt,” Oswell sneered. “Heard he praised the Lannister bastard for having Elia and her children murdered in cold blood.”

“He would not have allowed you to live,” Arthur agreed. “No matter that you were the child of his supposed love Lyanna. You are a threat to his throne. Lord Stark knew this, so to keep you safe, he lied to everyone. Given his honorable nature it was believable. We almost believed it as well, since the maids were told to tell us the child had perished as well as Lyanna. However, it was too convenient that he suddenly had a ‘bastard’ child. Then seeing you in Braavos… You really do resemble Rhaegar, even though your coloring is that of your mother. If your hair was longer and as dark as you said it was, then it would be easy for people to overlook your father’s heritage.”

Jon didn’t know what to think or what to believe. Part of him wanted to deny everything and run away from these awful words. Yet another part whispered that the facts lined up. He had been brought back after the rebellion from the south. Lord Stark had never mentioned who his mother was. Had his grandfather not told him his blood carries magic from both of his parents? And he never said Lord Stark was his father; he never clarified the other parent who was not a Stark, was his
mother.

Still, if it was true, why did Lord Stark never tell Lady Stark? He doubted she would have treated
him so harshly if she knew he was not Lord Stark’s son, but his nephew and in no way would he be
in line to take Winterfell from any of her children. He knew that was one of the reasons she disliked
him so, thinking he would usurp them from their rightful inheritance. Not that he would ever even
think of such.

Now he was not some bastard but a true heir to the Targaryen throne. Yes Baratheon had taken it by
conquest, but there would be banner men still loyal to the old line that would use Jon to usurp the
usurper. But Jon didn’t want the throne; he had never wanted anything even remotely close to it. He
just wanted the freedom to live his life and help his family. He knew they would need him in the
future, his grandfather had told him so. He had hinted that the Others would be coming back…

“Why are you telling me all of this,” Jon whispered desperately. He needed to know what it is they
were looking for in him. If it was a new King to follow, they had another thing coming.

“So that you understand we will never leave you unguarded again,” Arthur stated strongly. “When
you were in Winterfell we knew your uncle would keep you safe, but you are alone here in Essos.
As Kingsguard it was our duty to protect the royal family that we swore an oath to. More importantly
you are the last son of our friend Rhaegar. We promised him we would protect you. We couldn’t
before, and now we can.”

“Even if I never become a king,” Jon pressed.

“Even then,” Arthur assured. “Our duty is to you, Jaehaerys Targaryen.”
chapter 14 Eddard

Ned smiled as they came upon the wall of Winterfell and the beginning of Wintertown. The trip back had been a bit longer than expected due to an issue with the wheelhouse Septa Mordane. Rickon and Sansa rode in. Arya and Bran had refused to ride in it, claiming they needed to practice their riding, even though Catelyn had been against it at first. Ned had allowed it because both were right, and he knew if they got tired they could ride with one of the others or in the litter. Of course his two stubborn pups had pushed on regardless of how tired they were from riding, reminding him so much of Lyanna and Benjen. Thankfully Robb had taken to riding behind them to keep an eye out.

He had certainly taken his duty as a big brother more seriously as his punishment went on. It was good to see he was realizing his mistakes and taking the right steps to correct them. Not that his siblings made it easy for him. But, then it was not a sibling’s prerogative to make it easy for their other siblings. In fact, it seemed like an unwritten agreement between all siblings to cause each other as much trouble as possible. Of course if any outsider tried the same, they’d face the wrath of all the siblings. It was just the way family worked. At least now he could truly believe that Robb was once more following this thought process.

As they passed through the town many of the small folk greeted them, which his children returned happily. Ned would nod to those who called to him, often returning greetings of those he knew by name. These were his people and the people his children were charged with looking after when he was gone. Ned, like his father before him and his other ancestors, believed that he was not above these people, he was instead charged with a duty to watch over them. It did not make him better in the way many lords or ladies thought. These people were honest and hardworking, just as he was, they all simply had different jobs in life. He liked to think his people recognized and appreciated this fact as well, knowing he respected them just as they in turn respected Ned and his family.

He now knew many of them had come to like if not love Jon, and his disappearance had hit them as hard as it had hit Ned. The orphans had been particularly distraught. His nephew had done much for the town, and for the Stark name, more than any of them had known. The boy had even defended Catelyn on occasion, though he had yet to inform his wife of that little piece of information. Even after so much time the two of them still had a slight rift between them over Jon’s leaving.

He loved his wife, truly he did. However, he still had issue with the way she had dealt out the punishments Jon had received for the trouble he supposedly caused. He especially had issue with the way she didn’t bother to find the truth, preferring to believe the worst of a boy simply because of his birth status. That was not the way things were done in the North, and he had thought his lady wife had upheld honor and justice as much as he did. No, he had never expected her to love Jon as a mother, or even bother to learn to like him, but he did expect her to not judge based on one boy’s word, even if it was her son’s.

It did seem to him that she was starting to realize some of her own flaws, or at least admit them to herself. Like Robb, she too needed to take time to think over her past actions and realize one had to be accountable for their own actions. No doubt she found it harder to do, as she was so ingrained in her ways. Still, he had hope they would get through this stronger than before.

Mayhap if he followed Maester Luwin’s advice it would help. Granted he held no illusions that she would be furious with him and it could also completely blow up in his face.

The entrance to the East Gate loomed before them, the soldiers on the wall calling out in greeting as the gates slowly opened for their arrival. His eyes immediately landed on his wife, her vibrant red locks quite catching in the sunlight. She looked in good health and obviously excited to see her
children. Ser Rodrick was next to her, a steady presence along with his Steward Poole. It was the last presence that drew him short.

Standing next to his steward, dressed in his black ranging outfit was his younger brother Benjen. Though he smiled when the children yelled out greetings it did not go to his eyes. Instead those grey orbs, shared by Ned and so many of the Stark line pinned his older brother in place. There was anger brewing within them, as well as sadness.

Ned had wondered why his brother had not come the moment his first letter went to the Wall advising of Jon’s disappearance. A quick word to Jeor Mormont had discovered his brother was on a long-range scouting mission and not due back for months. It seemed Benjen had finally gotten his letters.

He took his time dismounting, allowing the children the opportunity to greet their uncle and mother. Already Arya and Bran were competing in telling their mother everything about their journey. Robb would often correct them and Sansa would chime in occasionally, though usually too polite to do much. Rickon just snuggled into Catelyn’s embrace, having missed his mother these past weeks he had been separated from her. Given how tightly she was holding their youngest the feeling was clearly mutual.

Ned greeted Ser Rodrick and Steward Poole, checking to make sure all had gone well in his absence. Once he verified all was well he turned to his brother to gauge his emotions. There was a slight tremble to his clenched fists and Ned knew this was not going to be a good conversation.

“How,” he demanded spinning to face Ned. “How did this happen? You were supposed to be keeping him safe! Safe is here in Winterfell not out there, alone, gods know where!”

“Essos,” Ned stated calmly. “He is in Essos, the city of Santh from his last letter.”

Benjen stared at him incomprehensively for a moment before he blew up again. “Essos is NOT a place for a boy of ten and two! He is supposed to be here, growing up with his family! He is supposed to be learning his letters and his history and his numbers and figuring out what he wants to
do with his life, as limited as his choices are since you claimed his as a bastard! He is supposed to be protected by you! Is that not what you promised Lya!"

Ned blanched a bit, stepping back at the accusation. How had Benjen…?

"Of course I know whose child he is," Benjen snapped angrily. "There is no way you broke your vows, Ned. You’re too dam honorable to even look at a woman once you said your marriage vows."

Suddenly his anger seemed to deflate. "And I knew," he admitted a little wetly, eyes adverting. "I knew she was running to Rhaeger to try and escape Baratheon. I knew, and I helped her and I didn’t say a word because she made me promise and then Brandon was running off and father following before I could tell either of them the truth and they… they…"

Ned didn’t even think about it as he moved to sweep his brother into his arms, holding the now sobbing man, his own eyes stinging with tears.

"It was not your fault, brother," Ned whispered soothingly.

"I should have…" He choked off brokenly.

"There are many things all of us should have done," Ned told him. "But fate conspired against us. We are lucky any of the pack survived that time." Ned held his brother close while the other calmed down. So many of the man’s choices started to make sense. "Is that why you chose the Black?"

"I had to," he confessed tiredly. "Everywhere I looked I could see them, and I felt so guilty that they were dead, because I did not tell them."

"I doubt Brandon would have listened even if you had," Ned pointed out wryly. "He always jumped to conclusions and never listened once his mind was set. And though you hate hearing this, you were a boy at the time."

"Was not," Benjen muttered petulantly into his brother’s shoulder earning a chuckle.

When his brother pulled away Ned studied the Heart Tree to give him a chance to pull himself back together. He moved to sit in his usual spot among the roots before the large pool at the base of the tree. It didn’t take long before Benjen joined him, his eyes red, but dry.

"Tell me what happened Ned," Benjen requested urgently. "Your letter said nothing but Jon was gone and no one could find him. Then there was one small follow up saying you’d gotten letters from him but nothing else to tell me how he was or what was happening! Honestly, you near gave me a heart attack!"

"I apologize Ben, I was not at my best either of those times," Ned sighed. "This past year has been very trying. But I will tell you what I know."

So he explained how he had come to find Jon was missing and what had ultimately cause it. He then explained his punishment for Robb and some of the changes in the family since then. He also explained the letters they had received including the current ones.

"Arthur Dayne and Oswell Whent," Benjen breathed out in awe. "By the gods Ned, when you keep secrets they are big ones."

Ned didn’t respond to the jab. "Do you think they recognize Jon for who he truly is? Will they keep an eye on him?"

"They seem to from the letters I have. They met in Braavos but the two followed Jon to Santh and have been keeping an eye on him, mostly protecting him from lecherous men and women," Ned huffed irritably.
Benjen chortled. “Well, Jon is rather ‘delicate’ looking for a northerner. Still I am glad he has found some protection over there.” The two brothers sat quietly for a moment. “Can I read these letters?”

“Oh of course,” Ned assured. “He is your nephew too.”

“Are you going to tell Catelyn? The truth about Jon,” Benjen clarified.

Ned sighed rubbing one hand down his face. “A part of me feels I should, but another part is not so sure. It is one thing that you know, or Reed, as he was there. But Catelyn? She will not be forgiving for me not telling her, or pulling her into this treason.”

Benjen snorted. “This is not treason. He is a child and should not be held accountable for his parents’ actions.”

“Do not underestimate Robert’s hate for all thing Targaryen,” Ned warned. “He may have loved Lya…”

“He did not love Lya,” Benjen snapped. “The man barely even knew her. He loved who he ‘thought’ Lya was. Do not try and blind yourself to this Ned. Baratheon would never have stayed to Lya’s bed and he did not know the true Lya like we did. The man was so enamored with becoming your good brother that he painted a picture in his mind and held onto it even when the truth stared him in the face.”

Ned felt his shoulders droop with the weight of Benjen’s words. He knew they were true and had even thought them a few times. But the part of him that had been Robert’s friend, practically a brother as they grew in the Vale wanted to deny the truth. But that didn’t do anyone any good did it? Ignoring the truth only led to bigger problems.

“Aye, you have the right of it,” Ned admitted solemnly.

“I think you should tell her,” he stated firmly, changing the subject. “Make sure she tells no one else, especially that sister of hers, but she should know. If anything it might make her re-evaluate a few of her own beliefs.” He snorted derisively. “You know in the Watch it matters not who you were or what your birth circumstances are. A man is judged by his actions and his own words. It used to be the way of the north, to judge a person on their own merits. We certainly never used to treat bastards the way we do now. The south has had a bit too much influence on us in that. What does a person’s birth matter if they are good and just? It mattered more about contributing to the welfare of our people for our survival. When winter finally comes, will someone’s birth status really matter in the end?”

Ned huffed, ruffling his brother’s hair, much to his annoyance. “You’ve gotten smarter little brother.” He dodged Benjen’s attempt to punch his arm. “But you are right. The child should not be punished for the actions of the parent. Instead they should be judged on their own merit. Just as highborns should not be allowed to hide behind their names. In fact I am learning this to be true more now than ever. There will be changes in the north, and many will be surprised I think.”

“Won’t be easy,” Benjen muttered, scuffing a boot along the ground. “Northerners are a stubborn lot.”

“True,” Ned agreed jovially. “But we Starks are the worst of the bunch.”

The two shared a wolfish grin before Ned stood and pulled his brother with him. “In any case, I am hungry and the children no doubt want to regale you with tales of their adventure.”

“Well who am I to deny them.”
Ned sat in his solar the next morning after fast had been broken. The children were either in their lessons or harassing their uncle. Most likely the latter, as they had not seen him in some time.

Benjen had read the letters from Jon the evening before, while Ned caught up on any correspondences he had missed. He had a few choice words to share about what he had read, which made Ned grateful the children had gone to bed early and Catelyn had left them alone. Really, he would blame the Watch for his uncouth behavior, but he had grown up mostly around Brandon and Lyanna so he rightfully couldn’t lay blame on that institution. Plus their father had never been one to mince words, so Benjen came by it naturally. He had been as excited as Ned about the glass houses, asking if it was possible for the Watch to work out a deal as well. They too could use better growing grounds, as it was much colder up their way. Ned had made a note to write Commander Mormont about it, along with the other lords of his lands.

A slight knock on his door broke him from thought. Calling out a terse command to enter, he began putting away most of his letters to give his attention to the one he had summoned. Sure enough Catelyn slipped through the door closing it tightly behind him. She seemed wary of why he had summoned her at all, as usually he would have found her in her room to speak of things, but he felt this was better away from their private chambers.

“You called for me, my lord,” she asked politely, though he could see the way her eyes pinched.

“Yes my lady,” he confirmed. “Please sit.”

As she did while he directed Ned gathered the drawing of Jon that had been sent and moved from his seat behind his desk to the one across from her. It was a risk, as she would likely try to hit him once she learned the truth; his wife could be quite fierce when her ire was stirred. Still, it would be better to put them on somewhat even ground.

“There are certain things I need to tell you,” he started slowly, not quite meeting her eyes. “Things I have kept secret for some time and truthfully I would have preferred to never reveal them. But there are events happening now that have shown me the truth will come to light someday whether I want it to or not. As such I feel it would be best if I revealed this truth to you before you heard it from any other source.” He paused trying to find the words. Suddenly his grey eyes met hers in a piercing stare causing her to sit even straighter. “What I am about to share with you cannot be told or shared with anyone else. Not your family, not any friends, no one.”

“Ned, you’re scaring me,” Catelyn admitted quietly, her eyes wide with worry. “You are acting as if you have committed a crime…”

Ned snorted at how accurate her guess was. “In my eyes, I have not. But others would not agree, mayhap even you. However, I feel it is important for you to know. I also need you to understand my reasoning, though I fear it will not assuage your anger.”

“Just tell me Ned,” Catelyn urged. “I will listen first before I act.”

He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. He tried again and failed miserably. He let out of huff of derisive irritation. “I have kept the secret so long I cannot even utter the words. Perhaps it is best if no words were spoken as even here the walls have ears.” He held up a hand to stop her protest. “Peace, there is a way to let you know the truth without me uttering it.” Slowly he handed her the parchment with the picture on it.
Catelyn frowned as she looked at the drawing. “This is Jon,” she stated flatly. “Why am I looking at a picture of…” She trailed off as her mind caught up with her eyes. She pulled the parchment closer, tracing every curve, every feature with intensity. Ned could see the exact moment everything seemed to click for his wife. Her Tully blue eyes found his, tears already forming. “He is… not your…”

“Aye.”

“Your… and…”

“Aye.”

Her hands were shaking now as she stared at the parchment some more, the tears flowing freely. “Why,” she demanded. “Why did you not tell me?”

“At first, it was because we hardly knew each other,” he admitted. “While I took you as my wife and would honor you as such, this information would have been too much. As time drew on and we came to not only know and trust each other, but to truly love each other, I did it to keep you protected. You could not be punished for something you could not know. After that… well, you saw how even now I cannot say it aloud. I fear if the words were even uttered the wrong ears would hear and my pack would once more be in danger.”

“He is…”

“Family,” Ned stated firmly. “One of the last pieces of a sibling I lost. A sibling who died in my arms begging me to protect her only child. I could do nothing else. I know how it angered you; how it must have seemed that I dishonored us both. I know all this time you claim he was a reminder of your disgrace by my leaving your bed, but in truth he was never a poor reflection on you.”

Catelyn went to speak but again he cut her off.

“Do not try to deny it. No one in the north would ever think poorly of you if I had slept with another woman and he really was mine. It was war and the two of us were separated for a long time,” he explained gently. “In the north, the fact you allowed him to be raised here has actually elevated your standing in the eyes of the people. In the north we do not punish the child for the actions of the parents, as such bastards are not as poorly regarded as they are in the south. Blood ties are too important. That being said, a woman would be within her rights to punish her husband privately should the transgression happen more than once, as well as have those children raised away from their home. However, the blood family would always make sure the child is provided for until they could do so themselves. The north is a harsh land and death is all too common to forsake any bonds of blood.” Ned gently lifted her chin so she could look him in the eye. “That wasn’t why you hated Jon, was it?”

“No,” she admitted finally, lips trembling and tears falling faster. She pulled away trying to compose herself. “At first it was, and I was angry at you for breaking our vows. But as he grew I noticed how very northern he was compared to the children I gave you. He looked so much like you with his dark hair and grey eyes, while Robb, your heir looked so much like me. Some of the servants even commented that Robb was more southern than not. When Arya was born I was thrilled to see she had your looks, but then Bran and Rickon took more after Robb and Sansa. He was the only SON you had that looked like a Stark. I… I grew afraid he would try to take my children’s place.” She wiped at her cheeks to rid the tears. “I was afraid he would take their birthright and no one would care because he was more of a Stark than they were…”

“He is not any more of a Stark than any of my children,” Ned assured her quietly. “I would never have allowed him to take their birthright, furthermore, Jon would not have allowed it. He cares for
our children too much to ever consider such a thing.”

“You cannot know that,” she yelled angrily. “There have been plenty of bastards that have tried to usurp the place of their trueborn siblings!”

“There have,” he admitted remaining calm. “But there have been just as many trueborn children who have done the same, if they felt they deserved to be heir over an older sibling. Jon, however, chose to leave because he was afraid with everything that had happened here with Robb and Theon he would have no other choice but to join the Watch to retain any kind of honor. So he found a way to have a life where he could still have a family of his own and be free to make his own choices. Instead of lashing out at those who harmed him, either intentionally or not, he left to make his own way. Even then he still watches out for his family, because that is the type of man Jon is becoming.”

Ned pulled back deciding he had given his wife enough to think about. “I understand if you are angry with me for not telling you the truth. You have every right to be. But I will not ask for forgiveness for protecting one of my own. I hope you can come to understand my reasoning, and if not I will accept that.” He gently took the scroll of the portrait from her hands before locking it up in one of his drawers. “I just ask that you do not share this information with anyone.”

“Of course my lord,” Catelyn responded coldly, still angry. “If I may be excused.”

Ned watched her leave with a sad sort of detachment. He just hoped he had not lost his wife over this.
Sansa carefully picked her way through the snow caked roads of Wintertown headed back to Winterfell from her weekly visit to the orphanage. Though it was summer, snow was still abundant in the North. Her father often told tales of the snows he and his siblings had seen when it was winter, but none of her siblings remember such. In one way she was looking forward to seeing a true Northern winter, but in another she wasn’t sure she wanted to endure such cold temperatures as the ones whispered about by the adults.

Adults… The word seemed so strange. At two and ten she was on the cusp of becoming an adult herself, though she had yet to flower. Her friend Jeyne Poole had already reached that stage in her development and often whispered to Sansa of marriage and children. Before Sansa would likely have joined in with her, trying to dream up some perfect southern knight or lord to marry. However, Sansa had grown much these past years, and she’d like to think it was for the better.

The Sansa of old had not truly appreciated her family or the people who lived and worked with them. She was only interested in being a ‘Lady’, with fancy dresses and pretty baubles, but none of the understanding of what such titles came with. Then Jon had disappeared into the night and their family had had a rather rude awakening.

Before, Sansa had followed her mother’s example with Jon, only being polite and keeping him at arm’s length. More than once she had made a disparaging comment about baseborns within his hearing, though she never dared to do so in her father’s hearing. She had seen the way Robb had started treating their brother after Greyjoy had arrived and thought he was finally seeing the way things were meant to be. She had not seen what her behavior had done to such a kind boy’s feelings, or the rift it had caused with her younger siblings. She had not seen how Robb wasn’t just treating Jon callously, but the rest of their family and people that way as well. Stories and songs had clouded her vision to the truth of the world. Dreams of southern courts and fancy things had captured her attention far more than the reality she lived. To have the curtain pulled away was a harsh and humbling reminder.

Finding out how little Robb truly thought of her then had hurt like a knife to the chest. Receiving cold shoulders from her younger siblings for her prior treatment of their beloved brother stung at her pride. Discovering how little the people thought of her southern ways and posturing was a blow to her worldview. This was perhaps the worst, as all her flaws were slowly but surely pointed out to her; if not directly (courtesy of Arya and Bran) then subtly by the adults around them.

It was difficult to come to understand just how wrong the songs and stories were. Always lords and knights were valiant and true, while bastards and villains were in the wrong and inherently evil. Well, she didn’t truly believe bastards were evil per say, but they were children made of sin, so clearly they were wrong somehow… Only they weren’t.

Jon had never been mean to her, or even unpleasant. Truthfully, if she thought back, he’d always been the one to indulge her games when they were younger and she had yet to learn what his true status meant. He always made sure their younger siblings were nice to her or included her in their play. He’d even let her practice on his hair when learning to braid. Not even Robb would allow that. Then she learned of other things he had done; helping the orphanage in town, running errands for the older members of their community, lending a helping hand when it was needed for no thanks or reward. He often stood up for those who could not defend themselves and sometimes even those who could, namely their family. If anything, looking back on it, he had been the only one of them to truly live up to the words of her Lady Mother’s family; Family, Duty, Honor. Jon had lived those...
words in spades for all he did not share the Tully blood, though few had truly seen it.

At first, Sansa hadn’t cared too much that he had disappeared. If anything she thought it was a blessing, for now his presence wouldn’t hurt her mother. Only instead of helping, more faults of their family seemed to be dragged out into the light of day. Robb’s behavior had finally been noted and he had lost his title as heir. Father and Mother were rarely speaking and even then it was only for day-to-day matters of the castle and the children. While her mother often let her temper free, their father had never shown such anger. It truly frightened Sansa just how much rage her father could produce, though it was never directed at her or her younger siblings. Robb and her mother, however, had faced it more than once in the early months. Her uncle Edmure had definitely received it in full force the one time he had visited trying to get father to reestablish Robb as heir. This had happened only a few months after Robb had lost the title and was still acting more like a spoiled child than a repentant son. Mother had thought having her family intervene would set father straight. All it had done was reinforce why father was a feared and respected Lord Paramount, and Uncle Edmure had grossly underestimated the situation and his own ability to do anything about it. Great Uncle Brynden had only snorted when the Tully siblings had looked to him to step in, telling both they had been the ones foolish enough to poke an angry wolf and he would not dare to tell a Lord how to raise their child. In fact, after spending time with Robb and his current attitude, he had agreed with father’s punishment.

This time also showcased the rift that had grown between the younger siblings and the older. Arya and Bran tended to avoid her or Robb unless forced by their parents to do otherwise. Rickon had thrown many a tantrum at the loss of Jon, who they had learned kept the boy entertained quite a bit much to their surprise. Sansa had not realized how much Jon bridged the gap until she had tried spending time with them, only to have them push her away time and time again. Her first thought had been to blame said boy, yet it had been pointed out often, and loudly (Arya) that Jon had been the one that made them come to her in the first place when they hadn’t wanted to because of the way she treated them. Talk about a slap in the face.

She might have ended any attempts then and there, but the Stark in her reared its stubborn head and refused to lose any more of her family. So she took the time and made the effort. While hard at first, her perseverance paid off and she could honestly say she was glad for it. Learning that she didn’t have to be perfect all the time, that she could just play and be herself with her siblings was freeing in a way. It also helped her see them as their own people, with their own interests, and trying to force them to be something they weren’t only pushed them away. She found out it was okay to be different, even in her own family, because at the end of the day they were still family and they would always support her.

This was most clearly displayed when Theon tried to harass her for her part in outing Robb and him to father. At the time she was still having trouble with her younger siblings, yet when the boy tried to corner her they had come out of nowhere circling the boy like the pack of wolves father always claimed them as. Rickon had even bit him when he tried to get rough with her. Never before had she truly felt like a member of the pack.

Theon’s action also woke her up a bit more to the reality that being a highborn did not make one a good person. How many times had she thought him to be disgusting with his comments, or rude and cruel? Yet she had swept it aside because he was the son of a Lord. Theon did many terrible things, not even caring how his behavior or actions affected others, yet she had ignored it due to his status. While she had ostracized Jon, someone who was ten times the man Theon could ever hope to be, simply because of his birth. This was not a flattering self-image at all.

Then Jon’s letters had come.

After everything she had said or done to him he had no reason to even think of her. Yet he had. He
had asked their younger siblings to look out for her. The gesture touched her heart as well as dug the
guilt a bit deeper. He even took the time to give advice to his siblings and send them some of the
most amazing drawings Sansa had ever seen. She wished now she had taken more time to truly
know Jon, and promised to herself to be better.

This promise truly began when her father handed her a small book created by Jon. His letters had
hinted at them, but surely she would not have one. So imagine her genuine surprise to have the small
carefully crafted book pressed into her slightly trembling hands by her father.

That day she had begged off lessons to take the time to read the story her brother had crafted for her.
She had examined each careful brush stroke of the drawings and every precisely written word. The
time and care Jon had clearly taken left her breathless, the story itself even more so.

When she first read it she had felt slightly insulted and hurt at how he depicted her.

She was a young wolf, but she dressed herself up like a bird, trying to make herself something she
was not. More and more the now little bird pulled away from her pack, dreaming about fancier
places, and more noble beings. Then birds from the south came, tempting her with their beauty and
songs. The little bird followed, pleased to be a part of something better than a rag tag pack. But soon
the little bird learned those other birds were lying. They sung pretty words and wore fancy feathers,
but their true colors were shown again and again. More and more the little bird realize the golden
palace she dreamed of was just a cage and she was a prisoner to these cruel creatures that did not
truly care for her. The little bird missed her family and wished she could return, but surely they did
not want her. However, one day the little bird heard the howls of her kin. They had come for her,
and when the cruel birds tried to fight them off to keep her, the little bird threw off her feathery guise
and joined her kin. Together they ran home, her pack welcoming her back with love and happiness.

She had thought long and hard after reading the story. Was she truly trying to be something she was
not? True she followed her mother’s teaching, along with the septa, which was more southern, but
surely she hadn’t been trying to pull away? Yet, another part of her pointed out how easily she
believed stories and nobles over truths she might learn from those who were technically beneath her.
Hadin’t father also pointed out that one must be careful in who they trust? That one’s position in life
did not automatically make you a good person. That some hid behind fake pleasantry and perfumed
clothes.

So she had solidified her promise in her mind. No longer would she judge based on what someone
showed her. She would judge based on what she learned about that person and their actions. Father
always told them the true character of a person could be seen in the way they treat those deemed
lesser than them. It was the Stark way to judge based on proven merit than on reputation.

She’d like to think she had proved to others and herself that she was just as much a Stark as the rest
of her siblings. She started getting to know the people and making her own, more informed opinions
of people. She also stopped trying to be a southern lady and embraced her northern heritage more.
Considering the friendlier reception she had from the small folk and even some visiting lords, it
seemed she had succeeded in proving herself a member of the north.

“Lady Sansa!” The call broke her from her inner musings.

Turning she found one of the small folk approaching her. It was Carson, a stable boy. He carried a
fairly large package with him.

“Good afternoon Carson,” she greeted him kindly, having grown to like the lad. He was a bit flighty
but always tried his best.
“My lady,” he returned, bowing a bit sloppily. “Ser,” he added for the soldier that had been charged with bringing Sansa back to the castle. “A package came from White Harbor, milady. For your siblings. Master Hawkins told me to bring it to Winterfell, only he didn’t tell me who I should give it to…”

Sansa glanced at the parcel wrapped in animal hide with a small piece of parchment indicating whom the package was for. She easily recognized Jon’s handwriting. A bit of excitement swelled through her. It had been nearly a year since they had heard from him, much to the worry of all.

“I can take it Carson,” she told him happily. “Thank you for bringing it all the way here.”

Before Sansa could reach for it Carson stepped back just slightly. “Begging your pardon milady, but it is rather heavy. I don’t mind carrying it the rest of the way if you’d be willing to show me where to put it?”

“Thank you,” she replied graciously with a smile, pleased with the proud grin she received in return. Old Sansa might have over looked the boy, but this Sansa didn’t and she was glad for it. The people here in Winter Town were truly good people and it warmed her heart to know how much they truly cared for her family. “If you’ll follow me.”

As they walked she asked him questions about his day and family, the boy only too happy to answer. He wasn’t much older than her and was working in the stables to help his family. Sansa thought he was a sweet young man, and she found it adorable how he seemed to moon over Rebekah, the baker’s daughter. The part of her that still loved stories squealed at the thought of their romance.

When they entered the great hall she found her father and mother there discussing a few things with the head servants.

“Sansa,” her mother greeted her happily before her eyes fell on Carson beside her. “And who is this?”

“This is Carson, he was kind enough to carry a package for our family here,” she introduced, smiling when the boy tried to bow for Lady Stark despite the awkward package.

“You’re Tom’s boy,” Lord Stark recalled as he joined them. “I heard you’re working under Master Hawkins now?”

“Aye milord,” the boy stated happily. “He sent me to bring this package to Winterfell, Lady Sansa was kind enough to direct me where to bring it. It wouldn’t be right for a lady to carry something heavy.”


“My pleasure milord,” he returned solemnly though his chest puffed out a bit, clearly proud of his service. Once he placed the parcel on one of the tables he bowed again before heading out.

Lord Stark chuckled as he watched the boy scamper off, remembering the time he was that age.

“Who could this be from,” Lady Stark murmured, eying the package carefully.

“I think it’s from Jon,” Sansa stated with barely contained excitement. “It looks like his handwriting!”

She noted her mother’s face took on a slightly strained look. Though nowhere near the downright disgusted look she used to hold whenever Jon was mentioned. After they had returned from White
Harbor she and father had a talk. None of them knew what it was about, only that Lady Stark had been very upset with her husband for some time. However, her attitude towards Jon seemed to have changed. She had even read the letters he had sent and would allow her children to discuss memories of him in her presence. It did make her sad when they spoke of him, but not in the way it had before. All of the siblings were dying to know what had been spoken between the couple to get this change but as of yet both parents had been tight lipped.

“It does look to be doesn’t it,” Her father murmured, pulling a knife out to cut away the twine holding the parcel together.

When the animal skin protecting the package fell away they could see a carved wooden box. On the newly revealed side of the skin was also some paint, suggesting it was more than just wrapping. Her father carefully lifted the box setting it to one side. Once done, they could easily see the painted stylized horse.

“What is it,” she asked, moving the cloth to get a better look.

“I’ve never seen such a sigil,” her mother replied thoughtfully, one elegant finger tracing the patterns lining the edges.

“It is Dothraki,” her father responded, tone more than a little worried. That had their attention as they looked to her father in shock.

Not much was known about the Dothraki, except they were a very dangerous people that lived in nomadic tribes. They would be comparative to the Wildlings here in the north.

Her father then turned to the box, made of a wood Sansa had never seen. The carvings were somewhat rudimentary and depicted wolves and even a weirwood tree. She wondered if Jon had made it himself. It stood to reason if he could draw he might branch out into other forms of craft. Her father seemed hesitant to open it, like he might find something unpleasant.

“Ned,” her mother whispered to him, placing a comforting hand on his arm. They shared a look. “It will be okay. I doubt it is what you fear. He’s a strong boy.”

Her words appeared to work as he inhaled deeply then opened the box with quick sure motions. His whole frame seemed to deflate in relief as the box was revealed to hold several wrapped parcels and a bundle of letters.

“Well, it seems we will be having a reading night,” her father announced with a happy grin.

“Indeed,” her mother agreed. “Sansa, will you let your siblings know. Perhaps knowing there is news of Jon will get them to behave for a bit.”

Sansa grinned almost cheekily at her mother. “They’ll be thrilled I grant you, but behave? Surely you jape, mother!”

Lady Catelyn allowed a small laugh, tapping her eldest daughter’s nose playfully. “A mother can dream!”
Catelyn watched as her children tried valiantly to restrain themselves during dinner, though the youngest had the hardest time. Even Ned was eating a bit quicker than normal, which had her sending him pointed looks. It was difficult not to laugh at his rather sheepish visage, but she managed. One of them had to set an example for the children.

Soon enough the main course was completed and all of the children turned to her with pleading eyes, willing to forgo any dessert if it meant hearing Jon’s letters. Barely refraining from rolling her eyes she waved them away from the table. Nearly all of them darted off, though Sansa managed a far more sedate pace with her.

This would be the first time she would be joining in for the reading of the letters. She had read the others after the fact, wanting to know what the boy had written, to make sure he was not steering her children wrong. Part of her had been very upset at some of the things he had told them, yet another more practical side knew the children did need to know such things. Such was the way of the world. That he had told them such things in concern for their safety aided in softening her ire.

When she had learned the truth of Jon’s parentage she had gone back over the letters and the drawings with new eyes. It had been a painful and guilt-ridden experience. It brought back all the times she treated the child ill, or had him punished without finding the truth of the matter. Looking back she had known some of the things he had been blamed for he would never have done, yet she had allowed the blame to rest on his shoulders because the darkest part of her wanted him to be punished.

It was truly a wonder Lyanna hadn’t come back from the grave to haunt her for the transgressions she visited on her son. She had argued she would have been different had she known the truth, yet that did not absolve her of her behavior towards the boy. Her Uncle Brynden had certainly been disappointed with her.

‘It’s one thing to ignore the boy, Cat, as is your right,’ he’d stated solemnly during his stay in Winterfell a few months after the whole fiasco had started. ‘It is another to actively find ways to punish him, especially when you knew you had not properly investigated any accusations against him. You were taught better than that.’

She had felt the sting of that reprimand for many months afterward. They did say truth hurt far more than lies.

The way the northerners started keeping her at arms distance and going back to the cool regard they had used when she had first arrived verse the welcome she had earned over time had also helped the lesson sink in. Afterall, her actions had hurt a child of Stark blood, something that was NOT done in the north.

She wondered if she would ever be given the chance to make amends with the boy, or if she even had the right to.

Catelyn was drawn from her thoughts when they entered her husband’s solar to find the rest of them waiting impatiently. Ned stood behind his desk, the box they had received sitting right on top of his paper work. Arya, Bran and Rickon were studying the little designs carved into the wood, pointing out the different animals found there. Robb was sitting in one of the side chairs, anxiously glancing at the box, a look of longing in his Tully eyes.
Her heart went out to her firstborn son, who had learned the hardest lesson. Jon had been his brother, his closest companion and practically his twin until Theon’s arrival. The bond they had shared should have grown stronger, instead of snapping as it had. It was only in these last few years Robb, and even Catelyn herself, realized just what had been lost when that bond was damaged.

Shaking her head slightly she took up another of the chairs by the fire, not as hardy against the chill of the north as her husband and children were. Sansa took the seat next to her demurely, though even her eyes glowed with excitement.

“Now that we are all here, shall we see what Jon has sent us,” Ned announced gamely, already removing the top carefully. The box really was a work of art. He pulled out a stack of letters tied together and a smaller note that Catelyn could barely make out said ‘Read First’.

“ ‘Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

Since I know you will not have the patience to read my letters first before diving into the gifts I have sent I will explain them first. As you will learn in my letters I have found myself riding for long periods of time. It can become a dull affair, even with certain people using the time to bombard me with knowledge, wanted or not. So I have taken up a new hobby, Carving. Yes I know, I do not seem the type and the last time I tried it turned out quite horribly. However, the wood in this area is far more agreeable to my fumbling attempts. Though these works are not the best, they are far better than my early attempts. I even made a piece for Sansa and Robb, as it seemed wrong to not include them. So no, you cannot withhold their gifts from them, even if they likely will not accept them as they are from me. The last is a gift for father and Lady Stark, which may be best for you to present to father.

Regardless I hope you like them and let them be a reminder that I think of you every day and miss you all.

Love,

Jon’. “

Now her three youngest were near dancing in place, wide eyes staring at their father to get on with handing their gifts out. Robb looked pensive and a bit hopeful, while Sansa discretely dabbed tears from her eyes.

No, Jon had no reason to include either of her eldest given the way Robb had once treated him and Sansa had ignored him. Yet he had, showing that even after being hurt by them he still considered them family.

Ned reached back into the box and pulled out a series of wrapped items. The cloth around each had a name indicating whom it belonged too. Ned smartly handed Sansa and Robb theirs first before handing the rest to the other three. True to form the younger siblings tore into the packages with gusto, impatient to get to their prize. Sansa took her time, ever the patient young lady, while Robb fumbled with his in hesitant motions. Their exclamations of delight echoed through the room as they revealed Jon’s presents.

Each child had been given a beautifully carved Direwolf. Each wolf was in its own individual pose and had distinctive features. Robb’s wolf stood tall and proud, a clear leader, its eyes keep watch over all. Sansa’s sat in a perfectly demure pose, the face and frame more feminine with a small flower crown gracing its head. Arya’s looked just as wild as her daughter, the wolf caught mid run, its face showing excitement. Bran’s looked like it was sneaking around, a mischievous and curious look to its face. Finally, Rickon’s wolf seemed to be prancing, its tongue lolling from its grinning
maw in youthful joy. All of them had amazing detail in the fur and features, showing the personality of each wolf as if they could come to life. There were little nicks here and there, indicating an untrained hand, however Jon clearly underestimated his talent.

“What did Jon send you and mother, father,” Bran asked, reminding them all of the final gift.

“Hmm, let’s see,” Ned murmured pulling the last bundled piece out. This one was flat, like a plaque of some sort. When Ned pulled the cloth away he seemed to freeze, his gray eyes wide in awe.

“Show us,” Arya begged impatiently.

Ned turned the oval shaped plaque towards them and Catelyn had to clench her fist to keep from bursting into tears. In the center of the oval was the Stark sigil and the Tully sigil, only the scales from the trout and the hair from the mane of the wolf combined where the two animals met to show their house was one. At the very top of the plaque there was a small rendition of Robb. In equal distances around the sigil were her other children. Sansa and Bran on one side then Arya and Rickon on the other. At the very bottom, a bit smaller than the others was a rendition of Jon. Patterned details wove around the renditions to connect them all. It was one of the most beautiful pieces Catelyn had ever seen.

“Tha’s our family,” Rickon announced happily, his speech finally reaching the use of sentences, if not complete words.

Catelyn found herself standing next to her husband without even realizing it, her fingers tracing the delicate lines with reverence. The gift was so thoughtful it only highlighted the goodness that was Jon. “We should find a way to hang this in here,” she murmured to her husband. “Such craftsmanship deserves to be displayed prominently.”

“Aye,” he responded just as quietly, yet she could hear the joy in his tone. “I would like that as well.”

“So what do the other letters say,” Arya interrupted them. She sat on the small rug in front of Ned’s desk with Rickon and Bran, the boys each playing with their new toys, but had glanced up at her words.

“Yes, yes,” Ned chuckled, well used to their youngest daughter’s lack of patience. Pulling the letters out again, he checked the dates to make sure he had the correct one. Catelyn took note of the small frown he flashed when he came upon one directly addressed to him, which he placed off to one side. She knew he was worried about just what that letter said.

“Alright, here is the first one,” he announced. “It looks to be written about a moon’s turn after his last.

‘Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

I hope this letter finds you well. I do apologize for not writing in some time. I have learned some information that left me somewhat confused. It has taken me some time to come to terms with it. Along with the fact I have been working to gather supplies for the next portion of my journey, I fear I have been remiss in writing to you. I know you are likely curious as to what I have learned, but it is not really something I can put in a letter. When next we meet perhaps we can discuss it then? After all some information is better relayed face to face.

I can tell you that my days have been busy, earning coin and securing various supplies. I have not only been selling my drawings, but I have also earned coin helping out in the stables. The horses
here are similar to the ones back home, though they seem to be built for more speed. They certainly
do not carry men in full armor. Master Oz said the breeds here are used mostly for long travel and
fast maneuvering, thus have a slightly smaller frame than most Westrosi breeds. They seem to like
me well enough, much like the ones back home. In fact the stable master was impressed with my
ability to calm one of his most troublesome mares. They call her ‘Biter’ because that is how she most
often displays her displeasure. I can proudly say she has not seen fit to bite me once.

I am quite sure you are curious about my next destination. I have chosen to travel to Qohor then
down to Voltaris. It will be a long journey and we will be skirting the edges of Dothraki territory.
Yes I said we.

Originally I planned to join a caravan or even travel on my own, but Master Art and Oz both vetoed
that decision. According to them a boy of ten and two is not able to travel on his own. I pointed out
that I most certainly could and I would soon be ten and three, nearly a man grown. Neither seemed
too impressed by this information and have opted to join me to assure I do not fall afoul of someone’s
sword. There are other reasons but I do not feel comfortable going into them right now.

The good thing is I will be able to continue my sword training. Before you lament how unfair it is I
get to learn fighting but not have to suffer through any other lessons I will inform you that neither
Master Art or Oz will allow me to slack in that area. Master Oz has taken to teaching me other
languages and even improving upon the ones I have already picked up. The man has a true talent for
it, though Master Art says he only learned because the man is a consummate gossip and would have
perished if he could not know all the juicy information simply because of a language barrier. Sadly,
while Master Oz knows many dialects, the Old Tongue is not one of them. So I must continue to
improve solely on what I remember and the small tome I copied from our library. I trust you (Arya
and Bran) are still practicing and teaching Rickon as well. It is always good to know the language of
the North, especially if others do not. Not only is it a way to honor our ancestors, but it will give you
a way to speak or write to each other that no one else can intrude upon. Mayhap you should suggest
to father that all of you learn it, especially Robb, as the Northern Lords will be suitably impressed
with such an effort.

Other than languages Master Oz is also teaching me various histories and making me memorize and
recite ridiculous poetry. I personally think he simply enjoys tormenting me with the pieces he
chooses. Meanwhile, Master Art works on my numbers with me by having me take inventory or
giving me random scenarios where I must account for supplies, men and time frames to work
everything through. For example, he had me calculate how many men I would need to hold sedge in
a castle as large as the Harrenhall, what supplies I would need for a three month siege verse a six
month siege. Sometimes I am the one laying siege and sometimes I am the one being sieged. It is an
interesting exercise and helps to put real world applications to my lessons. He has even taught me
cyvasse to a greater degree, though I have yet to win against him. Still I suppose there is some
improvement as I can now last a whole ten minutes against the man, verse the two I had started at.

As you can see none of you need worry about me gaining an inflated ego. Master Art and Oz
continue to keep it wholly deflated between the two of them.

We will be leaving soon to start our journey, now that the rains are nearly over. Here in the desert
area rains, though welcome, are often considered very dangerous. The water sometimes comes so
fast that it is unable to be absorbed by the ground and so much gets washed away that flash floods
occur. Flash floods were when large bodies of water suddenly come crashing through an area at
speeds faster than a horse can run. There is oft little warning of them and many have perished to the
might of the water. I am very glad Master Art decided we should wait a bit more before leaving.

Keep watching over our family and keep each other safe.
I love you,

Jon’

And there are some runes here giving a blessing for the gods to watch over our family,” Ned finished, showing his children.

“What does it say,” Sansa asked, eying the strange ruins.

“May the Gods keep you safe for all time,” Bran read easily.

“For eternity, stupid,” Arya countered earning a scowl from her brother.

“Actually that particular rune could mean both,” Ned jumped in to keep the brewing fight from beginning. “Though I am proud of you both for knowing this much.”

“How can you read it so easily,” Robb questioned with a small pout. “I’ve memorized all of the necessary prayers father has in the Old Tongue and still I had trouble reading that. And I did not start those until I was ten.”

“There’s an old book we found in the library,” Bran informed them with a shrug. “We thought it looked interesting and begged Jon to help us figure it out, so we did.”

“It would be good for all of the children to learn it,” Catelyn mused, deep in thought. Though the Starks were well loved there were always enemies to families such as theirs. If the children had a way to communicate that no one else would likely be able to decipher, at least not without a lot of effort, it would only be a boon. Plus Jon was right that the Northern lords would be highly impressed for their children to learn the language. She had learned after Jon’s leaving how wary many of them were that her children were too southern. “Do not some of the Mountain Clans still speak it?”

“A few,” Ned agreed. “In fact, my grandmother’s clan, the Flints speak it quite a bit.”

“Oh could we learn it,” Arya nearly begged. “It would be like our own secret language!”

Ned chuckled at her cheek but didn’t correct her. “I will make inquiries, but I cannot promise anything. I can however see if I can help where you lot left off.”

The children cheered, even Sansa looked excited at the idea of learning the Old Tongue.
“Next letter,” Rickon suddenly called out, his wolf waving in the air to catch their attention. Catelyn swept him up into her arms earning a squeal as she settled him on her lap. Soon her baby would be too big for such.

“Your father is getting to that,” she assured him, kissing his temple.

“Right, it states…

‘Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

Traveling by horse through the desert is vastly boring after the first few days. It does not help that we are not traveling at speed. Master Art decided it is best if we continue at a slower pace to keep on the lookout for any raiders. This will also allow both him and Oz to continue with my lessons. Do not misunderstand me, I am grateful for their teachings. I just wish there was a bit more of… something going on.

Well, in a way there is. I have procured some of the local wood and am trying my hand at carving. Yes, I know my last attempt was truly horrid; (do stop snorting, Bran) however, the wood here is a bit softer, so I feel it will bend to my knife better. Already I have managed a few rough wolf heads. Very rough, according to Master Oz. Master Art though thinks it is a good hobby as it will keep my fingers nimble. Granted he only agreed once I proved I would not slice my own fingers off. At least it forces me to concentrate instead of day dreaming constantly.

The worst part is the heat! By the gods I do not think I have ever been this hot! Most days I am stripped down to a loose tunic with the sleeves rolled up and a thin pair of breeches and still I am covered in sweat. While I have used cloth to cover my head, as my dark hair captures heat very well, the other parts of me left uncovered have grown red and sore from the sun. Oz told me I would get used to it, while Art makes sure I drink plenty of water. Still, I feel as if Old Lonnie has thrown me into her oven so hot I get during the day. Strangely enough at night it is far cooler than expected. Nothing like the north, but much more pleasant than the daytime. I get to tease Oz then, as he is always mumbling about the cold. One day I might bring him north and toss him into a snow bank to show him the true meaning of cold.

The stars here are so different than back home. There is no Hunter or Giant. Instead I have seen a constellation that Art said is known as the Great Horse and another that resembles a cup of some sort. Oz said it was the cup the gods drank their ale from, right before he starts lamenting his lack of ale. Art has taken to throwing rocks at him to stop his moaning. His aim is quite impressive. Art has also continued helping me learn to navigate by the stars, which is slightly different on land than by sea as there are actual landmarks to help orient oneself with.

There is a vast difference in the vegetation here than back home. The bushes and grass that grows here is sparse, yet occasionally there are plants that grow well over a man’s head, even when riding a horse. It is a reed like plant that bends with the wind, yet is very strong. Art cut a few down and fashioned them into poles and taught me some spear fighting. The plant was surprisingly sturdy. It certainly left many bruises each time Art got past my defense, which is far more than I like. Some nights I look like I spilled Maester Luwin’s ink on my arms and legs.

The animals are interesting too. We found a strange armored creature that rolls up into a ball whenever it feels threatened. It likes to prey on different bugs in the area. I managed to touch one while it was rolled up, the skin felt hard but not like a shell, more like cured leather that has not been
broken in. There are even tiny scales that give it a reptilian feel, though Art says it is not. He called it a Pangolin. I drew a few pictures of it after it became comfortable enough with my presence to unroll. It even ate some crickets from my hand! Oz said sometimes elephants roam this area too, but we have yet to see one. They are supposedly cousins to the ancient mammoths that once dominated the north, though far less hairy and not quite as large. Still I do hope to see one. I have seen a variety of rodents and some foxes, all of them rather dully colored compared to ours. And I did find a snake in my sleep role one morning, which was not a pleasant way to wake up. Thankfully it was of a nonlethal breed. Oz just laughed at me and turned it into breakfast. (Though not the best meal I have had, it is not all that bad.)

Hopefully next time I write I will have something a bit more exciting to tell you, though I doubt so. Remember to keep up with your studies. I am thinking of you all.

Love,

Jon.”

Ned pulled out a series of drawings and passed them to the children. Several were of the strange creature he had described in his letters. It was indeed different from anything they had seen, but the girls were already cooing over it.

“That thing is ugly,” Robb muttered with a grimace as he studied one picture.

“You’re ugly,” Arya shot back instantly.

“He’s just jealous he’s not nearly so adorable,” Sansa added primly.

“You can’t honestly tell me you both think this thing is cute?”

“Yes.” Both of her daughters answered him so assuredly he actually took a step back.

Catelyn bit her lip to keep her giggles in, turning her eyes to the pictures of different animals Jon had captured that Rickon was eying. They were each rendered remarkably well. She wondered just what they would look like if Jon had paints with him.

Ned was chuckling as he pulled the next letter out.

“Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

Well I certainly asked for it, didn’t I? Not even two days after I finished my last letter to you we ran upon…” Ned groaned dropping his head into his hands, the letter fluttering to his desk.

“Ned?”

All of the children turned to him immediately, all interest now honed on the next letter. A slight feeling of dread clutched at her chest, but surely Jon was fine. He had sent the letters to them after all…

Her husband looked up at them a resigned look on his face. “I swear to the gods that boy has some sort of bad luck for the trouble he attracts.” Before any of the children could respond he began again.

“We ran upon a group of slavers who had been stealing women and children from various Dothraki hordes. Thankfully they did not spot us and we were able to get a better understanding of what was going on. Truthfully we originally thought it was a Khalasar (What the Dothraki call their individual
groupings). However, soon it became clear that far more nefarious things were occurring.

There were various cages set up with women and some children locked within. Other children were forced to work around the camp, serving the men holding them there. More than one child was beaten for even the tiniest mistake. Some were no older than Rickon. Upon closer inspection we could see differences in the dress and ornamentation some of the women and children wore. Art said this meant they were from different Khalasars.

The men in charge were not Dothraki upon closer inspection, at least not many of them. In fact they looked rather similar to Master Chin. He had told me once that some of his people try their luck away from Yi Ti, though most turn to crime. Regardless it was clear these men were holding these people against their will.

Oz figured these men were preying on the Khalasars and stealing those they thought would not be missed. Though children are considered sacred to the Dothraki. It is true the different Khalasars battle each other and the winner takes the members of the old one as their slaves, but the children are all integrated into the group as they are the next generation. I find it very strange that none of the Dothraki noticed this many children being taken.

In any case I couldn’t let them be kept in such conditions. The values father instilled in us are just too strong, and I refuse to let such injustice stand, not when innocent children are involved. Luckily Art and Oz agreed with me, though they were not thrilled about the idea of taking on the group alone. Sadly it did not look like we would have time to find any sort of reinforcements. We did not just charge in though.

Always remember, regardless of how bad a situation seems, you should take a step back and make a plan, or in truth several as most all plans change at first contact with the enemy. But, if you wish to succeed at all, you need to plan. This is exactly what we did.

We drew out the layout of the camp and where the guards were located. We also took careful note of the landscape and where various supplies were held. (I drew the camp up for you so you’d have an idea of what it looked like.) It was decided that Oz and I would sneak in at night, towards the western side, which had less guards due to the natural rock face of the area. Art would cause a distraction on the other side. Oz and I would then start to release those held prisoner there and hopefully get them to start freeing the other prisoners. We knew we would have to kill any of the slavers we came across and there was a possibility that some of the prisoners would be killed in the escape. However, it was the only way we could assure any could get out.

So we waited until the hour of the wolf, by this time the guards were mostly relaxed, not expecting any issues. Art managed to cause a wonderful distraction. We were doing quite well opening the cages and the prisoners seemed very keen on getting them all out. Unfortunately we didn’t know about a number of guards out on patrol. It became chaos when they showed up. Surprisingly a number of the woman took up arms where they could and joined in the fight, as did a few of the older boys. I made sure the rest took the younger children away from the camp towards safety.

It was a fierce battle and sadly some of the prisoners did not make it. The hardest part was losing some of the children. But in the end, the slavers were either captured or dead. Once we secured those still alive in their own cages, we worked on helping with the wounded and rounding up those that fled. All told there were over a hundred women and children still alive.

I will tell you that as my second true battle it was wholly different from the first one I took part in. This time I helped plan the attack, even if it was for a good reason, I knew I was going in there and would likely kill my opponent. In some ways this was worse than the first battle and my first kill. I still took no joy in it and actually felt quite ill once it was all said and done. I have no doubt I will
have night terrors to relive the event. The only thing that helps is seeing the amount of children we managed to save.

Some of the eldest females came together, only a few speaking anything other than Dothraki. Thankfully Oz knew their language and was able to translate for us. They explained how this group had preyed on them and slowly built up their horde of slaves. When asked why none of the Khals had noticed, they explained how some of them had been there over ten and five months! These men were quite careful and rather intelligent in how they managed to take these people. However, they had been getting more brazen and taking more people at a time. So I think it would have been noticed soon.

When we asked if they would be able to make it back to their people, the women stated that they would need help with such. There were far more children than adults and the oldest males were all less than one and ten. Though they could navigate the desert for the most part, they did not feel comfortable without some form of protection. So it was decided we would help get them back to the capitol in Vaes Dothrak.

Part of me is excited to see this city, as not much is known about the Dothraki except that they are fierce warriors and quite deadly. But another part really wants to help these children. Most of them are so young. I look at them and see you three and Sansa. If someone had ever taken any of you, I’d have hunted them to the ends of the earth. I would also be grateful for anyone willing to help you. So hopefully the rest of the Dothraki will not consider us enemies.

We plan to leave tomorrow to head to their capitol. Today was taken for rest and to help prepare the carts and horses we found as well as the children. Some of them are still injured or weak from their imprisonment. Art has put me in charge of the boys old enough to help and I am showing them how to get the horses ready and other chores that are necessary for such a journey. Some already know, having lived with horses all their lives. Still, they seemed willing to follow my lead; some were almost a bit too eager to listen to me. I am not sure why.

I also ended up taking care of some of the younger girls, which seemed to amuse the women of the group. Then again, maybe they thought it was funny I allowed them to climb all over me like I used to let the three of you do. I could never say no to a child looking at me with such hopeful eyes begging to be picked up. In fact I ended up carrying more than one throughout the day. They liked pulling on my curls too. Is that a girl thing? I remember Sansa and Arya both liked to play with my hair when they were younger too.

I need to go, Oz is demanding I tell the children a story to practice my ability with Dothraki. Personally I think he just doesn’t want to deal with the younger ones. Remember to take care of each other and our family and people. Injustice happens everywhere, but it is what we do when we discover it that helps define us.

I love you all,

Jon”

“Well that’s good right,” Arya finally spoke up after a long time of silence from the family. Her voice was slightly higher than normal and she looked a bit distressed. Catelyn held her hand out to her child and was a bit surprised at how easily her wild girl took it, allowing her mother to bring her in close. “He did the right thing, didn’t he? And he’s fine… right?”

“He did,” Catelyn assured her child, and the rest of them, who she could see also held some doubt in their eyes. “It is not an easy decision to make. The stories would tell you of valiant knights that
charge in to defeat the evil men, but they do not tell you of the fear and the danger of these decisions. However, at the heart of it, men like Jon, choose to do the right thing, not the easy thing. The right thing often comes at a cost, to yourself or to others. That is why you must always think carefully about your decision and actions, for there are always consequences.”

“Jon is learning this in a very difficult manner,” Ned added, his voice soft yet firm. “And no doubt he is grieving for the innocents lost, but he also saved many more. When it comes to battle, there are going to be losses on both sides. It is the harsh reality of life, no matter how we wish it wasn’t. As your mother pointed out, all actions have consequences, even those you do for the right reasons.”

“Will the Dothraki be thankful,” Sansa asked quietly. Catelyn knew this was hard for her eldest daughter. Though she had grown far more in the past few years and even saw beyond stories, she still had a small part of her that wanted to believe in the tales of knights and heroes. “Surely they’ll be grateful for saving their kin?”

“I do not know,” Ned admitted solemnly. “Not much is known about Dothraki culture aside from their prowess in war. They also do not have much interaction with those not of their culture aside from raiding. However,” he pushed on keeping the children from interrupting. “As we have clearly received word from Jon in these letters, I am hopeful the meeting went well.”

“Perhaps we should continue,” Catelyn suggested, hoping the next letter would help calm the children of their worries and her own.

Ned nodded clearly grateful for her proposal.
Ned pulled out the next letter, this one coming with several pictures. He smiled a bit when he saw the depictions of children at play. Passing them around, he began the next letter.

“Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

I apologize now for thinking any of the three of you, separately or together, were difficult to manage. I have been thoroughly proven wrong.

This last week has been very trying. Moving a large group of women and children is far more challenging than I had ever guessed. Even some of the older boys have taken to throwing tantrums or just being plain stubborn, now that they know they will not be punished harshly. Some days I wish to pull my hair out over the trouble they give me!

Oz and Art simply pat me on the head and continue patrolling the outer edges of our little company. The woman just focus on keeping the carts and horses moving forward, and of course the youngest of the children who cannot quite run around. I somehow ended up voted to be the watcher over the rest of the children.

I have broken up fights, soothed skinned knees, corrected disrespectful speech, cleaned up messes and been forced to carry several of the little brats for hours at a time. Just the other day I had to corral a group of them that had thought it a splendid idea to sneak away from the group to play in one of the bamboo groves. (Bamboo is apparently what the strange pole like plants are called.) I have even had to make rounds telling stories and tucking them in to get them to sleep. Some of the girls have even taken to playing with my hair and putting braids in them. (Again they remind me so much of Sansa and Arya that I just can’t say no.) I often end the day falling onto my blankets in exhaustion.

The only reprieve is Art and Oz have suspended most of their lessons for the moment. Though they do make me train some of the older boys in the footwork for fighting. This often leads to wrestling matches and far more bruises for me than the boys. A fact my two teachers find very amusing.

Occasionally the women take pity on me and take over keeping the children occupied. More than one has asked me if I was married. I keep telling them I am too young for such things but they just pinch my cheeks and giggle telling me they don’t mind me being young. I think it has become a game to them to see how red they can make my face turn with their words and suggestions. These only get worse the more I practice their language. Oz finds it terribly entertaining. (I cannot wait for the day I can finally beat him in the ring and show him how un-amused I am over this!)

At the pace we are going it will take us a little over a fortnight to reach Vaes Dothrak. There are a few rivers we will either have to cross or go around which could make it longer depending. Thankfully those wounded are healing well. Art is the one doing the most treating and has even taken to teaching me more about treating wounds. It is a fascinating if disgusting field of work. I cannot imagine what one must do for battle wounds. Still, it is good knowledge to have. Perhaps you should ask Maester Luwin to show you the basics of treating wounds. At the very least if you are out somewhere alone you can take care of yourself should you get injured, at least until you can find help.

If you can, see if you can get Sansa and Robb to take these lessons as well. They may not think them important but they should have this knowledge as it could save them one day. I’m sure the three of you can find a way to make this happen. I will ask you to do this as a favor to me.
I have managed to get some carving in, though I am working more on horses than on wolves right now. I have made many teething toys and little figures for the children. It helps keeping them occupied and gives me a chance to practice. I have also learned a few new games. I added some to the pictures, with the rules as well, so you can try them out. There is one where they clap hands together going faster and faster until one person messes up. This teaches counting, coordination and speed. I have tried it a few times. It is actually quite challenging yet enjoyable.

I need to go, I am being summoned to tell stories again. Know that I think of you all everyday and miss you very much. I hope that you still think of me just as fondly.

Love,
Jon.”

“Why do the girls seem to love his hair,” Robb blurted out in confusion. Bran also looked unsure of the answer and Rickon didn’t really care.

“Because it’s so curly and smooth,” Sansa informed him promptly.

“And his curls bounce,” Arya added. “Like springs! You can pull them out and let them go and they just bounce back into a curl.”

“It also keeps braids very well,” Sansa sighed in envy. “I wish mine did too. It’d be nice to have a bit of a curl.”

“Girls are weird,” Bran whispered to his brother Robb, earning an agreeing nod.

Catelyn just chuckled as she looked at some of the drawings being passed around. Many showed children at play or the group doing various day-to-day tasks. The clothing, or lack of, the Dothraki women wore were quite shocking. Then again, Jon had mentioned the sweltering heat in his earlier letter. It was unlikely they had linens so just wore less leather. A few even showed the hand games he spoke of, detailing just how to play them. He was right, they looked wonderful for teaching counting and coordination. She’d have to try some with the children.

She did note that he never seemed to draw Art or Oz. Ned had shown her the first pictures of them and she’d recognized them right away. How could she not. The Whents had served her family for years and Arthur Dayne had been an impressive figure at the tournament of Harrenhall. No doubt the boy knew the truth now. She wondered how he felt about that and what the letter to Ned stated.

“This one looks a bit longer,” Ned commented thoughtfully as he pulled out the next letter.

“Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

I apologize for not writing you, however keeping a group of children moving is far more difficult than anticipated. I think I would have an easier time corralling all of the cats in Winterfell and Wintertown combined. Thankfully the children are used to a nomadic lifestyle so getting them to move during the day was not too difficult. Instead it was getting them to stay close to the caravan and not cause mischief. I nearly wept with joy when the walls of Vaes Dothrak came into sight.

The city is exceptionally large and located at the base of a mountain next to a large lake. To enter one must pass through a gateway guarded by two enormous horses. Then you continue down a winding road to the main potion of the city, which is made up of circular huts. Most of the Khalasars stay out here, but the Khals and the main families stay within a wooded compound, which weapons are not allowed within, according to the women we have ridden with.

Art, Oz and I considered staying at the gates, allowing the children and women through and then
leaving to continue our journey. The women wouldn’t hear of it, neither would the children. Several of the girls latched onto me, refusing to let me go until I promised to meet their families. Many of the boys also wanted us to stay, though I am sure it is because of the sword lessons than anything else.

Our decision was made for us when a group of Kos (these are lieutenants of the Khals) came upon us likely thinking we were attackers. Their reactions were somewhat varied upon seeing us, though surprise was one of the stronger ones. Several of the men actually got down and were claiming children and women. I was surprised they would show such open affection for their families in front of outsiders, but given how long some had been captive I suppose the joy of finding them alive was greater than their worry of us.

The head female of our group, Thilabi, spoke to the Kos that seemed to be in charge, for lack of a better description. She explained how we had freed them and brought them back to their people. I tried to project a sense of confidence in front of these men, who were clearly warriors. Of course having a few children still hanging off me like I was a favored climbing tree didn’t help my attempt. Any hope of respect went out the moment one of them asked who the foreign girl was. (It is not funny. Again I ask you not tell Robb or Theon about this. It’s bad enough northerners consider me… ‘delicate,’ but if they knew how many people over here mistook me for a female once my hair grew out I’d never live it down!)

Art and Oz were no help. The former just remained stoic as always while the latter almost fell off his horse laughing. The only assistance I received was from the girls within hearing, several of which claimed I was their ‘future husband’, so they had better be nice to me. If the ground could open up and swallow me whole, I would have wanted it to happen then and there. Even now I get teased about it and I sincerely doubt either Oz or Art will let me forget about this.

In any case, we were lead towards the main city. Many of the women and children were swept up by various Khalasars their people clearly happy to have them back. Thilabi stayed with us, so she could retell the story to the Khals, which I was grateful for. From the looks several were throwing our way it was clear they do not trust outsiders. Like siblings the Khalasars may war with each other, but they would band together in a heartbeat if an outsider threatened any of them.

At the main gate we had to give up our weapons, which is not an easy thing to do, especially when surrounded by so many people you do not know. However, traditions should always be respected, even when they are not yours. The most interesting thing happened when I handed over the dagger given to me by the Dothraki warrior as payment for the drawing I completed. Apparently he had boasted about the picture I drew, even showing it to some people. Even more shocking, the man is one of the higher respected Khals. Several started asking me to draw them, until the main Ko told them to shut up because the Khals were waiting, along with the Dosh Khaleen. (This is a group of women who ‘rule’ the city; they were the wives of Khals who have passed on.)

We were lead to a central structure that was the sturdiest of all the structures in the village. It was far larger too, indicating its importance. (For some reason, no matter the culture, people always think something has to be big to show its prominence. Personally I think that just makes it a target.) I will admit it was a bit nerve wracking to walk in there. The Kos had circled our little group, though Art and Oz immediately made sure to take position at my back. Regardless, these were dangerous men, who fight nearly every day of their lives, so having them surround us was not exactly comforting. Thankfully I remember father’s lessons to never let an adversary (or even an ally) know if you are uncomfortable and was able to keep my features blank. A difficult thing to do when nearly all of the men are of similar size to Great Jon Umber. (I feel safe in admitting to you three that I really dislike how short I am.)

The meeting actually went fairly smooth. I won’t bore you with the details, but suffice to say we
were thanked for our actions in retrieving those we could and bringing them home. Hugo, the Khal who gave me the dagger, called for a celebration feast. I will just say that a Dothraki feast makes the revels at Winterfell seem very tame indeed, even those the Umbers and Karstarks attend. Sadly I could not take my own advice of not over indulging in drink, because the Khals and Kos kept plying me with it, and Oz informed me it would be rude to not accept. I now have some doubts about this, but as I did not wish to anger men of such a society I went along with it. (I was useless the entire next day.)

We had planned to leave shortly after, but the Khals asked (demanded) we stay for their solstice festival they have each year to honor the Great Stallion (their god). So we have been here a week already and will remain least another fortnight. We have made a small camp for ourselves on the outer edges of the city, and have even visited the market place. It is quite impressive. Here they do not deal in money but in traded goods. I am unsure such a system would work in Westeros on the scale they have here, but it works quite well for them. I can also say I have seen some goods that would make kings and queens drool with envy over the opulence being swapped for beer or food. (Mostly beer, the Dothraki like their alcohol.) They also do not have any formal writing system and keep their history in the oral tradition. In fact having the profession of storyteller is almost as revered as a high standing warrior. I find this slightly sad, as much has likely been lost or forgotten.

Still I have learned a lot here, about the people and their culture. It is true that the adults they take from conquered cities or Khalasars are turned into slaves, but this is done for a period of five years. The adult has the chance to integrate into that Khalasar and become a member. If they do not, they either remain a slave or are killed. This is to keep the Khalasar safe as well as introduce new blood to keep inbreeding down. All children though are integrated into that group immediately, teaching them their ways to strengthen their numbers in the future. I cannot say I agree with their ways, but it is not up to me to change it.

While waiting for this festival I have had many requests for portraits from various Dothraki. Oz loves it because they most often trade ale for my services. I do not mind as it allows me to practice. I am still working on my carvings though and I think I have gotten quite good. Many of the horses I have carved were able to be bartered for goods at the market place. Sadly my time is limited for such pursuits, as Art has picked up my training, as we are stationary. The children have also come to drag me off to either play (the girls) or train them (the boys). The latter has led many Dothraki warriors to join in, so I have picked up a few of their techniques. Though they do not use a sword, instead they used a curved blade called arakhs, along with boas, whips, daggers and bows. In fact their skills with bows are very impressive. They can fire while riding a horse in full gallop and hit a moving target!

I have added some drawing of the market place and the people here. I could not draw some of the areas as they are considered sacred, and I would not like to be rude. I hope you enjoy them. I will try to write again soon, but I cannot give any promises.

Stay safe my fellow wolves.

Love,

Jon.”

“He’s not going to join them, is he,” Bran asked in worry.

“Of course not,” Arya barked back, though Catelyn could tell even she was not so sure. “He’s just being nice and visiting because they asked him to. Besides he’ll be coming home one day, because he belongs here!”

“I don’t think either of you need to worry,” Ned cut in, speaking to all of them as even Sansa and
Robb looked unsure of this. “Art and Oz would never allow it, and as Jon has written, he does not agree with their ways. While he may be forced to stay for a time, they will not be able to keep him forever, nor would he be inclined to join them. Think of him as a… diplomatic guest for the time being. As he has saved many of their people, I’d not think the Dothraki would be dishonorable enough to harm him, aside from plying him with too much drink.”

“But…” Sansa bit her lip, looking apologetically at her younger siblings. “What if he marries? There seems to be a lot of interest in him for such.”

Robb groaned painfully. “And he’s right! He is considered ‘delicate’, but not in the way he thinks,” Robb admitted regretfully. “It’s because people think he is pretty, not that he’s weak. I had overheard many men stating Jon would make a lovely ‘wife’ even if he is a boy and many of the maids are jealous he’s prettier than they are. The Dothraki already think he looks like a girl! What if one of them tries to steal him like the Wildlings do? Will this Master Art and Oz be able to truly protect him? Maybe we should send some northerners to protect him?”

She saw that her husband was actually considering this, and she couldn’t blame him, the boy had been abnormally pretty (now knowing who his parents were it made complete sense). However, there was no need to send bodyguards with who he had watching over him. “Ned,” she stated waringly, earning a slightly rueful look. Turning to the children she continued. “Your brother will be just fine. He is also too young for marriage so do not worry over it.”

“But girls get married at three and ten,” Arya protested.

“Because girls mature far faster than boys, my dear,” Catelyn informed her, as if sharing the world’s greatest secret. “Boys that young are not marriage material.” This seemed to please her two daughters, but disgruntled the men of the family. Oh well, they needed to learn the truth. “Perhaps we should move on to the next letter?”
Robb listened with half an ear as his father read the next few letters. Each one detailed different aspects of the Dothraki way of life and Jon’s experiences with them. More than one had beautifully detailed pictures to go with them. Yet all Robb could do was stare at his carved direwolf and feel the well of guilt that had been building for years since he was forced to get his head out of his ass and realize what he had done.

For the longest time it had just been him and Jon. Even when Sansa and Arya had been born, it was still mostly he and Jon. Robb hadn’t been thrilled to have more siblings, perfectly happy to play with Jon. But Jon had been thrilled and there were a number of times he had dragged Robb into playing monsters and knights to allow Sansa her maiden fantasies. Then when Arya was old enough it was more monsters and monsters, though by then Theon had arrived and started pulling Robb even further from his siblings.

He really couldn’t say what it was about the Iron Born that pulled him in. Maybe it was the newness, or his seemingly worldliness. Theon was older than him and Jon and seemed to know so much. More to the point he actually told Robb the things he wanted to know, even if his parents deemed him too young. Perhaps that was why he had been enamored with the older boy. Theon had catered to his desire to know things and to be treated as an adult, or as close as he could get. Slowly the other started poisoning him against Jon, then his other siblings.

Thinking back he was glad Jon had left, for his brother hadn’t deserved the things they had done to him. It was bad enough he suffered under his mother before, but with Robb and Theon egging the woman on, Jon stood no chance. It also showed him the harsh truth of things. Theon had tried to turn him into an Iron Born, a sworn enemy of the north. Had he continued on his path he would likely have found himself usurped rather quickly by the other northern houses. They did not take kindly to the southern way of thinking, and definitely not to the Iron Born way.

His leaving also showed him Theon’s true colors. The moment he’d been punished the other had dropped him like a stone. Worse, no one else in the castle seemed surprised by the older boy’s actions or attitude. This had truly opened Robb’s eyes.

Granted it took months for the lessons to really sink in and for him to actually seriously look back on his actions and conduct. He had definitely not liked what he saw.

Those months also highlighted the difference in his mother’s way of thinking and the northern way of thinking. Never before had he realized what it meant to be northern verse southern. Yet he had learned. The south had many dark views on things that people often had no control over, for instance bastards. Jon had not chosen to be born; yet he was the one suffering for his father’s mistakes, all because a few bastards in the past had risen up against their trueborn families. However, he remembered several histories where trueborn siblings did the same. In fact, it seemed to be truer for a second or third born son to dispose of the first born than for a bastard to rise against the trueborn house. Also, in the north the few times it did happen for a bastard to rise up, it was usually because the trueborn family had inflicted a grave insult upon said bastard’s family.

Really he doubted it would have been Jon to rise against him when they were older if he had continued on that path. Likely it would have been Arya kicking his ass then placing Bran in charge. It was something she would surely do, and definitely before he could marry her off.

The relationship he had with his siblings had gotten better, though it had taken a lot of time and was nowhere near where it could be. Jon had been the one to act like a true older brother. Funnily enough
Robb often found himself asking what Jon would do in situations that cropped up with his brothers and sisters. It actually helped more often than not, though it left a deep hole in his heart when he remembered Jon should have been there in the first place.

The worst part was knowing that he had been the one to destroy the close relationship the two had shared together. This was depicted most clearly in the storybook Jon had left behind of the two of them and their adventures. Each one was a reminder of their days playing in the Godswood, pretending to be some great hero or lord of the past. Those had made him smile at first, but the unfinished stories had turned the nostalgia into a harsh guilt that ate away at his heart.

He sincerely hoped that one day they would be able to have adventures like they did before. Only he knew, deep inside it was doubtful. He had hurt Jon, hurt his brother, and that is not something easily forgiven or forgotten.

He was broken from his thoughts when his father pulled another letter out. The last one had depicted an amusing story involving several Dothraki children, a bunch of chickens and a goat. Even so far from home Jon couldn’t say no to the whims of children.

“Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

Well it seems like we will be leaving soon. I have enjoyed my time here in Vaes Dothrak; though I will be pleased to be traveling again. Mainly because then I can get away from some of the more demanding warriors. Do not tell anyone but I have had several marriage proposals. Some are from or for women, but a lot are from men to be their spouse. I know the old gods do not forbid such relations, but I am only three and ten, marriage is not something I am considering right now, if ever.

The most persistent is a man name Khal Drogo. Well, truthfully he only asked me to be his Khaleesi once; the rest of the time he hounds me to teach him more about cyvasse and Westrosi speech. I do not mind helping him out and he is a skilled strategist, still sometimes I get uncomfortable with the way he looks at me. Art tells me not to worry, that the other man is simply taken by the novelty of seeing a northerner. Oz keeps hinting that if Drogo offers enough ale he might consider handing me over. (Yes I did actually hit him for that statement. And yes Arya, I made sure it was extra hard.)

I do have to admit that Drogo is very intelligent. He has one of the largest Khalasars even though he is one of the youngest Khals. I think he likes the idea of having someone with a different way of thinking about battles to give his tribe more of an edge in their battles. We have even sparred a few times and I definitely see why he is feared in combat. Though I cannot be counted out just yet. I did manage to win a few of our bouts, which apparently is highly unusual. His Kos often become riled up when we spare, making all sorts of bets.

This is actually not something just Dothraki do. If you watch closely the soldiers in the Keep at home you will see them whispering to each other when certain men are sparring. They are making bets. I do not encourage any of you to join in, but it is helpful in learning how people think. Knowing what a man is willing to bet, even on a small event can often tell you about their character.

Never trust a man willing to bet more than what he has in his purse, or more than he has a right to give. Those type of men will only betray you in the end, especially if it suits their needs.

Soon we will be heading to Qohor. Drogo’s Khalasar is planning to travel there soon as well to meet a prospective bride for him. I find it slightly odd, as the Dothraki do not often allow outsiders in their groups, let alone a Khal to marry one. And yes I am completely disregarding the fact several have asked for my hand. (Most prefer to see how red I will get. I am working on controlling that reaction but it is not going very well.)
He actually offered to escort Art, Oz and me to Qohor, though I think it is mostly so we can continue with our cyvasse games. They have become very heated the last few times, lasting for over two hours each. Art is encouraging these games since it is helping me learn how to combat various attacks from an opponent that does not prescribe to the Westrosi style of battle. It is better to learn as many different styles of strategic thinking as possible as it can only help you in the end. After all, should I ever need to go to battle in Westeros, the lords there will not be expecting me, a northerner, to use a Dothraki battle tactic.

Interestingly enough I have also started teaching some of them reading and writing. Drogo saw me writing to you three one night and asked me what I was doing. When I read to him the account of what occurred that day, he found it fascinating. He liked the idea of putting words down in his own view of how events occurred so that no one could misunderstand what really happened. I told him that is why we write much of our history down, so that certain events will not be forgotten. So now I find myself teaching him and many of his Kos to read and write as well as more about numbers. Art has also approved of this, as it will help in my own lessons. Truthfully I think he just likes the fact I am stuck in one place and not off getting into trouble. After the incident with the wild horses he has been stricter about how I spend my time.

On the bright side, this has also allowed me more time to work on your presents. I do hope you like them. I think I have gotten them as close to reality as possible. Then again I have never seen a direwolf in person, so perhaps not. Still, they do resemble the statues in the crypts quite well. I have had to explain to the Dothraki just what wolves and direwolves are. They do not have such predators in their lands. They do have lions though and large cats that can run faster than horses to take down prey. They are not as large as lions and are very sleek looking. I would have thought them near harmless had I not seen one take down a antelope, a deer like creature here on the plains. It was quite spectacular to watch. I tried to capture their movement in a few drawings, though I do not think I did them justice. Perhaps one day you can come see for yourselves?

I still have not seen elephants yet. I am holding out hope though. I promise to draw as many pictures as possible.

I will try to finish your gifts and get them sent to Santh to have them sent to you. Hopefully it will get there in good time. The longer I travel in these areas here in Essos the less likely things will arrive in a timely manner. At least the Dothraki like me enough to actually honor my request to take a package where it needs to go.

I do hope you are all well and still behaving. Learn all you can about the world and the ways of the north. Don’t skimp on the lessons you don’t like either. Just because you do not like them does not mean they are not important. Knowledge is the greatest gift in the world; it is also the one thing no one can steal from you.

Keep watching over our family and know I am thinking of you all every day.

Love,

Jon”

“See I told you,” Arya huffed. “That Khal Drogo is gonna steal Jon and marry him and have babies and we’ll never see him again! Though it would be neat for Jon to be the Khaleesi, that’s basically a queen right?”

“He’s not going to marry that man,” his mother scoffed in disbelief. “Besides, Jon clearly has made hints that he still considers Winterfell home, as he should. Nor does he feel any need to be married at this time.”
“Your mother is right,” his father added with a small chuckle. “I think this Khal is just lonely and likes the fact Jon doesn’t treat him any different. No doubt a Khal is much like a lord or a king, so those under him would all be deferential. I can tell you from experience it can be very trying to deal with people constantly bowing to you, when you simply want someone to be straightforward. Though I am sure Jon is polite, as he has been taught, he still treats Khal Drogo as another warrior, and that can mean a lot to a leader.”

“So… he really doesn’t want to marry Jon, he just wants a… friend,” Bran asked, working through what his father was saying.

“Exactly.”

This resonated with Robb. He had learned how lonely it could be as a ‘bastard’, but he had not thought of such as a lord. People had always surrounded him and he had Theon. Yet, thinking on it, except for his mother, his father didn’t really have anyone he could open up to. Uncle Benjen’s visits were too few, though his father always seemed lighter when he saw his sibling. While the lords of the north that answered to him could be considered peers, they were also of a slightly lower station as his father was Warden of the North, and it would not do to tell his worries and problems to them.

Robb had had that in Jon when they were younger, and he thought he had it in Theon. Now he knew the latter was only an illusion and he had lost the former to his own foolishness. He was lucky he still had his other siblings, though they were not quite that close yet. Their relationships were getting better.

He traced the fur of his direwolf statue longingly. If only he had known then what he truly had before he had let his stupidity destroy it.

“Well this looks like the last letter for the family,” his father announced wistfully.

Already his siblings were complaining, not wanting to go to bed anytime soon and not liking the fact they had no more words from their beloved brother to read. They would have to content themselves with re-reading these letters and going through the drawings sent. His father had taken to having them saved carefully by Maester Luwin, who had learned how to properly preserve documents at the citadel.

“Dear Arya, Bran and Rickon,

Traveling with a full Khalasar is very different from taking a group of children and women to Vaes Dothraki. The sheer logistics of keeping everyone together and properly moving are mind-boggling. Making sure there are proper supplies, hunting parties and scouting the locations for the next stopping point. Everyone has a job, and they all work in near seamless form to keep this giant swarm of people progressing through the grasslands. It actually reminds me of the stories father told us about the way armies move from place to place.

I have been invited to ride with Drogo more often than not, even racing a few of times. Apparently most think I must have been Dothraki in a past life for the way I can handle a horse. I decided not to inform them how the horses of the north are often larger and far more difficult to handle. No need to start that argument.

There is another lesson I have learned. Sometimes it is best to allow others to boast without trying to counter their ideas with what you know. While it can be good to keep others humble from time to time, or even just share your culture, you do not want to do so constantly. Then it seems like you are discrediting their achievements and it can make people resentful or start fights that are not productive. (Yes I know that sometimes it is difficult not to just smack some people up the head, but I’m sure you
can restrain yourselves (Arya)).

Still the nomadic life of these tribes is quite interesting to see in action. They can construct and destruct massive tents in record time. Not even our guards who spend more time patrolling or hunting the Wolfs Wood have mastered the speed these people can set up camp. More remarkable is when we leave a place there is almost no trace we were there the night before.

Oh, I finally got to see a small heard of elephants. They were spectacular. If Mammoths were even the same size I can see why they would have been very impressive to our ancestors. I have added several drawing for you to enjoy. The creatures are large enough for up to three grown men to ride the backs of them. Though they generally move slowly, they can pick up speed when needed. According to Rhade, Drogo’s First Ko, they are rather intelligent creatures and can remember things much as humans do. He had a rather interesting story about a Dothraki boy who had saved a young elephant from death. He then went on his way, but over a decade later he was in a life-threatening situation when to his surprise an elephant saved his life. It turned out to be the same elephant he had saved years prior. He knew by the scar the elephant had received when he had originally saved him. I asked how they knew this to be true and he told me this had only happened twenty and five years ago, so they had heard the story from the Dothraki warrior themselves. Rhade had even seen the elephant in question and swears it acknowledged their group.

You will be amused to find out that my complaints of the heat have driven some of the women to making me my own Dothraki outfit. I drew a picture of how it looked. I think it is humorous, as does Oz. He feels I do not have enough muscle to properly wear it, though the others said I just needed a few tattoos to truly fit in. Apparently the warriors are marked with tattoos, usually some sort of geometric design, to show their strength.

At the time I had declined such markings, as I did not feel I had truly done anything to prove my strength. (Yes I know I helped save those children and women, but I was with Art and Oz, who took the brunt of the fighting.) However, the choice was taken from me about three weeks into our travel.

I had taken a break from riding with Drogo and his men, watching over some of the younger children. (Truthfully, I was dragged off by the children to play and Drogo and his Kos were so amused they didn’t do anything.) We had been camped near one of the rivers, so the children had directed me to an area with lots of bamboo and rocks to play in the stream. The mothers had decided to take this chance to relax leaving me on my own with the hellions.

All was well until a group of brigands tried to abduct some of the children. I had to fight to put them down. I managed to stop the attack, and keep the children safe, allowing time for the other warriors to come to our aid.

Apparently these brigands were actually members of another Khalasar and had used another attack on the other side of the Khalasar to distract the warriors from their plan to take the children. The Khal of this rival Khalasar is apparently notoriously dishonorable. He had planned to use the children against Drogo as hostages. I managed to thwart that plan and killed the First Ko for the rival Khalasar. This was a man just as notorious as his Khal for his underhanded ways in fighting. Trust me, he certainly earned his reputation. I thought Bronn had fought dirty, but even he had honor compared to this lout. At least now these men will harm no one else ever again. Seeing the state of many of the members of their Khalasar I can honestly say they will not be missed.

Remember a true man or woman’s character is shown in how they treat those who are lessor in status than them, not in how they treat their peers or superiors. This Khal and his Kos were terrible people, and not one member of their Khalasar was saddened to see them fall. Indeed, many rejoiced for their downfall. Some even assisted in taking down the warriors leftover that refused to submit to Drogo.
Always treat everyone the way you want to be treated, for if you don’t you may regret it.

In any case, the children were safe and Drogo declared I needed to be marked as a true warrior for defeating Harin, (the Ko I mentioned) and my defense of the Khalasar. So now I have a very blue tattoo, which would show the other Dothraki that I am considered an honorary member of Drogo’s Khalasar, as well as an honorable warrior.

Now while I am sure you are thinking this is amazing and that you might want one for yourselves, let me tell you right now… Tattoos are VERY, VERY PAINFUL!!!! I am quite sure my lip is bloody from how hard I had to bite it to keep from crying out in pain. Art mentioned it would be seen as bad if I made any noise while getting the marks. They had to literally needle the color into my skin, so it would scar to remain there. Not so pleasant sounding anymore is it. I pray you remember this should any of you ever consider such markings in your future. (And if you do get one make sure it can be easily hidden, for I have no doubt your mother would kill all of us if she found out.)

On a lighter note I finally finished your gifts and have even made a box to carry them in, though it is nowhere near as well made. I didn’t have as much time to make that piece. We should be in Qohor in a few days and I will be able to find someone to take your package to Santh for Master Khan to bring it to the North.

I do hope you enjoy these letters and pictures I have sent you. It might be some time before you get the next package. Remember that I love you all and I think of you always.

Keep up in your studies; always try to learn something new. Listen to your mother and father, as well as Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrick. Be kind to Robb and Sansa.

Love,

Jon.’

“I want to see him in his Dothraki outfit,” Sansa of all people burst out the moment father had finished the letter.

“I want to see his tattoo,” Bran added excitedly.

Their father chuckled and dug out those pictures, taking a moment himself to eye them. Robb moved to stand by his siblings to get a glimpse. Jon looked different and yet the same. He had more muscle, though was still small for his age and definitely more delicate in build than most northerners. The Dothraki clothing seemed to leave him mostly bare from the chest up with a few strategic hard leather pieces for protection. His hair was much longer now that he was regrowing it, but he kept the top part pulled back out of his eyes, much like their father. In fact he looked a lot like father.

The picture with his tattoo showed him bare from the waist up, a set of long geometric lines etched from his stomach, just above his navel over his heart and curled on his shoulder. They looked a bit rudimentary yet clearly held some meaning. If what Jon had said was true, Robb had no doubt they were painful to receive. That was a lot of skin to ‘scar the color’ into, with a needle no less.

“El’phants!” Rickon was holding another set of drawings waving them happily. The beasts were not something any of them had ever seen, and few books had any depictions of them. The few of mammoths they had were very abstract, more like a child’s drawing than not.

These beasts were huge, if the comparison drawing Jon added meant anything. He made sure to draw Drogo next to the beast, taking time to note that Drogo was an intimidating six foot four. Even Great Jon would seem average next to the warrior.
“Wow, do you think mammoths were actually that big,” Arya asked breathlessly, grey eyes wide.

“Actually they are rumored to have been much bigger,” their father commented thoughtfully. “In fact, it was said a man could stand on the shoulders of another man and not reach to top of a mammoths head. And this was if both men were near six feet in size each.

“Because Giants were said to be able to ride them,” Bran added enthusiastically. “Right father?”

“Indeed.”

“Perhaps you all can speak to Maester Luwin on the subject some more,” their mother stated calmly. “Tomorrow. Now it is time for you all to get to bed.”

“Must we,” Bran and Arya chimed together and even Sansa looked ready to protest.

“Yes,” their mother stated in her strictest tone. “Already it has passed the hour you should have been asleep. So no arguments.”

Robb wanted to argue like his siblings, but even he knew a losing battle when he saw one. Instead he swept Rickon into his arms, careful of his own wolf statue. He followed his mother as she led the others out of the solar to their rooms in the family wing.

He silently prayed to the old gods to keep his brother safe, and hoped that one day they could meet again so Robb could apologize.
Ned chuckled as he watched his wife herd his reluctant children off to bed. Even his proper Sansa had put up a fight. Thankfully his wife knew how to corral them after years of experience. Carefully he gathered the letters and drawing and placed them gently back in the box Jon had crafted. Truly the boy had an exceptional talent as an artisan. Perhaps when he came back he would see about apprenticing him to a master. If he came back…

No, he shook his head sharply, he could not think that way. One day he would see Jon again and explain to him why he had held his tongue so long about his mother. He would also apologize for not seeing what was truly in front of him and the pain the boy had gone through.

He may only be his nephew, but Ned did love the boy like a son. Jon was the first child he held, the first he cared for. For all that Robb was his firstborn son and child, Jon would always hold a special place in his heart. His eyes drifted to the letter addressed to him, or more correctly, Lord Stark.

He truly feared Jon had not only learned the truth but it would damage their relationship beyond all repair.

“Putting it off will not help Ned,” Catelyn advised him quietly.

He jumped when her voice registered. How long had he been sitting here staring at the letter? How long could he get away with not opening it?

“What if he hates me,” he asked quietly, voicing his deepest fear for the first time.

“Jon is likely angry, and he has right to be,” she counseled evenly as she moved forward to claim the chair across from his. “But he could never hate you. He loves you too much for that. He loves all of our family too much to ever hate any of us, even if we truly deserved it. I wonder now if Jon even has the capacity to hate.”

“I pray to the gods he does not,” Ned whispered sadly. “Hate is such a terrible thing and I have seen what it does to the men whose hearts it takes. I would not wish that on any of our children.”

“Then put your fears aside husband,” Catelyn assured him gently, reaching across the desktop to squeeze his hand encouragingly. “All of our children are too strong to let hate control them, especially Jon.”

He caught her gaze with his own drawing strength from her words. Carefully he cracked the seal, the only letter that had one. (No doubt in hopes his youngest would understand the importance of not reading this letter, even if it was clearly not addressed to them.) Taking a deep breath he began to read.

‘Dear Lord Stark,

I find myself wanting to say so many things to you, yet I cannot seem to write them. I had even thought to ignore my desire to write to you, but I have been informed by a reliable source that not only do I need to write this letter to help myself but you need to hear what I have to say. So I will endeavor to utilize the Stark blood in me and get to the point.

I know the truth.

I dare say I know more about it than you do. I have met some reliable people who have informed me
of my mother and the circumstances of my birth. If you have read any of my prior letters to Arya, Bran and Rickon, which I suspect you have, then you have seen the drawings and likely recognize who I refer to.

I have never felt so angry or betrayed in my life. I struggle with the rage that swells inside me knowing what I know now. For a time part of me wanted to hate you…

But I can’t.

Even though I only partially understand why you never spoke of her, to me or even your own wife, I know it was not done out of malice but to protect me. To protect all of us. I cannot claim I would have done anything differently had I been in your shoes.

More than that, YOU are my father. You raised me and I love you too much to ever hate you. Not to say I am not still angry and I might throw a punch next time we meet.

I am also writing to you not just as my father but as the Warden of the North.

Since I was young I have always had strange dreams. Most often of the crypts and the Kings and Lords of Winter telling me I did not belong. For many years I had thought they meant Winterfell as a whole, since I was a bastard, and did not deserve to be in the seat of the Starks. However I have learned that when I dream, it is not normal. I travel, for the lack of a better word. Not my body but my mind and soul. When I was younger and my spirit traveled into the crypts I was too close to the land of the dead. The person who told me this had his own conversation with you not long after my departure. He reminded you that winter is coming.

I know this seems confusing and you must wonder why I bring it up now.

Since my… journey has begun I have had even more dreams. Sometimes it is of home, but more often than not it is of the Wall and the land beyond. I know this seems unbelievable, but I have put drawings in along with this letter to show you I speak the truth. I have never been to the Wall; I have never met the people I have drawn. Yet I can clearly see their faces and I know their names and some of their stories.

Far to the north, well beyond the Wall in the Land of Always Winter, stirs an evil that has not been seen in centuries. It is the true reason our ancestor built the Wall. The Wildlings have already experienced some of its power. It is angry father, and so full of hate for all things that live. I worry for the North, for our people and most especially for our family.

This has driven me to search for ways to help the North. I believe now that I was meant to come to Essos. After all it is close to the birthplace of my… other ancestors. I think the way to defeat this coming evil may be found there, or at the very least some sort of weapons to give our people a chance.

I also believe… I also believe you will need to search out Mance Rayder. He is now the leader the Wildlings are flocking too, though in my dreams they call themselves Free Folk. If our world is to survive this coming darkness, we must put aside the animosity of these past centuries and work together. If we do not, the people south of the Wall will be facing an even greater army than any in recorded history. Only this army will be made up of the dead, led by the White Walkers.

Again, I know this is unbelievable, but you can check my facts. You can talk to the Lord Commander and find out that what I have seen is true. Please father, for our family, for the north, please trust me and look into this before it is too late.
I will do all that I can to find a way to fight this threat. Even if my roots have some southern leanings I am a Northerner, and I will not let you fight this alone.

I just want you to know that even though I am still angry about what I have learned I will always love you. I will always think of you as my father. I just hope you will always consider me your son.

Love,

Jon.’

Ned sat back barely holding back the moisture forming in his eyes. Jon still loved him and thought of him as his father. It was more than he dared to hope for and a small piece of his heart, that had been so distraught since the boy’s disappearance, settled at this knowledge.

However, the rest of the letter also worried him. The one who had reminded Ned that winter was coming was his father, his dead father. Which meant he must have spoken to Jon at some point, either when the boy was still here or in these dreams of his. He had never heard of Jon’s dreams before, and it hurt that the child had not come to him with such worries. Ned would have told him that he was welcome, for he was a Stark, even if he did not hold the name. His heritage, thankfully, was clear for any to see.

With trepidation he pulled out the pictures Jon had included. Sure enough he had one of the most detailed drawings of Castle Black and the Wall he had ever seen. There was no way Jon could have drawn this without seeing it. Furthermore were pictures of various black brothers, their names and some details scribbled next to them. All of them things Jon would not have knowledge of as Benjen did not speak to Ned’s children about such things. There were drawings of the Haunted Forrest, a strange looking Keep he labeled as Craster’s Keep, a depiction of a Wildling camp and several of the people. Some had only names; others had names and clan names added to them. The most shocking was the depiction of the giants and mammoths, both of which had up close drawings and scale drawings to emphasize their size. He had even drawn Mance Rayder in surprising detail, as the man had not been seen south of the Wall since he deflected from the Black.

All of this was very disconcerting, and before he might have considered it a prank. However, the cold feeling in his gut and the sharp memory of his own conversation with the prior Lord of Winterfell stayed such thoughts. Pulling out the last page he froze, feeling the blood drain from his face.

The figure on the page looked human, mostly, but clearly was not. Had Jon had paints Ned did not doubt he would have a clearer picture of what this thing truly was. However, it was the eyes, captured so perfectly that left him near breathless with fear. The evil and hate within them were near overwhelming.

“Ned,” Catelyn asked, noticing his paleness.

She had already read through Jon’s letter to him and some of the pictures. Likely she wouldn’t believe Jon’s claims. Most people wouldn’t…

He barely heard the rustle of her skirts as she moved around the desk to stand by his side. He heard the deep indrawn breath and felt the shake in the hand she laid on his shoulder. Still he could not pull his eyes away from the horrifying picture before him.

“I think you need to visit Lord Commander Mormont,” Cat whispered hoarsely. “If… If what Jon is saying is true… If he is really having these dreams…”
“We need to prepare the north for the worst,” he finished for her, eyes never leaving the haunting figure of the Walker Jon had drawn.
“He is a northerner! A Stark, he will learn the Stark ways!”

“He is also a dragon you over grown oaf! He needs to learn the Targaryen ways more! He has already had years with you Starks, for what good it did!”

“What can you teach him? How to fuck his sister?”

Jon sighed as he rocked back on his hunches watching the latest argument between his Stark and Targaryen ancestors. When his dreams had started getting more and more detailed he had never imagined this occurring. Yes, he missed his family and longed for some sort of contact with his blood, but this was just trying.

It had started with his last dream of the far north, which had him coming face to face with one of the White Walkers. His heart had nearly frozen in fear as those blue eyes locked onto him. Never before had any of those he dreamed of been able to see him or even guess he was there. This… being though, had definitely been aware of his presence. It had even turned fully to him, walking forward with a calculated menace that would have grown men quaking in their boots.

For one desperate moment Jon tried to will himself awake, but it did not work. He truly feared he would meet his end in the dream realm. When suddenly hands firmly gripped his shoulders and yanked him back. Upon opening his eyes he realized he was still in the dream realm, but now he was surrounded by people he did not know. Though he clearly recognized the dark hair, long faces and grey eyes of the Stark family. He equally recognized the pale locks, slim builds and purple eyes of his Targaryen ancestors.

All of them standing before him wore armor of some sort, all very practical despite how he’d heard his father’s family could be a bit ostentatious. There were men and women both, about half a dozen for each side, and none had lived in the last century. The most prominent were Aegon the Conqueror and King Torrhen Stark. Both of whom scolded him for getting so close to the enemy.

Since then nearly each night he slipped into his dreams he was treated to lessons from both sides of his family. Some nights went rather smooth, others like tonight…

It had been over a week since they had reached Qohor, over three since his dream of the Walker. The day before he had finished his letters home and the gifts for his siblings, packing them carefully to send off to Santh. A small merchant group was headed that way and agreed to take it for him free of charge. Of course that generosity might have been due to Drogo hovering over his shoulder glaring menacingly at the poor man. Jon had merely rolled his eyes at the large Dothraki, who only grinned unrepentantly.

He’d come to see Drogo as a friend, both sharing more about their lives growing up than either had shared with anyone else. Only Jon’s younger siblings knew more and that was because they’d been there. Though there were something even they had not learned about their brother, like his first crush on the cook’s daughter. He would miss Drogo when he left, but he also felt they had a bond that could survive the distance. He promised himself to try and write the big man, deciding to buy one of the hawks here in Qohor used for letter delivery, much like the crows in Westeros. It was easier to do so now that Drogo had learned to read, for the most part. Since the Dothraki language had no formal written form, they had adapted the Westerosi alphabet for their use.

Drogo had promised to try and write him back as well, though his skill with that was still
rudimentary at best. Jon encouraged him to do so in hopes it would be good practice for his friend. Plus he wanted to know if Kale ever got the balls to ask Tabit to be his wife. He had some good coin resting on that one.

He had hoped to stay for the wedding, but Drogo’s bride’s brother was holding her up, which was not earning him any points with the Khalasar. That said bride was reportedly Daenerys Targaryen also worried him. While he had heard she was rather docile, her brother Viserys was said to be borderline mad like his father. Art and Oz had both frowned heavily when they had heard the news, knowing the dragon prince had sold his sister in hopes of an army. While Drogo would provide men, it was doubtful they would ever follow the pauper prince across the sea to Westeros.

For a time Jon had wondered why the two knights had not been with the Targaryen siblings, especially as he had not been with them their entire exile. However, neither man would speak on the subject. Perhaps if Aegon or Rhaenys had been the ones to survive they would be there protecting them instead. After all, Jon was just a bastard, (even if they claimed differently) he was not meant to be anyone of import like his half-siblings had been once upon a time. He knew for sure that the two knights would one day find something far more worthy to spend their time on than him. For now he would simply thank the gods for what tutoring they deigned to give him.

“Oh by the gods! Would you two shut it,” another voice cut in. Jon glanced over to see Queen Visenya glaring at the two men in question. “It’s a wonder any of you men ever got anything done! You bicker worse than fishwives!”

Jon had to bite back a grin as he watched the two men cower before the tiny woman. For all she was Targaryen she reminded him greatly of his sister Arya. She would adore this woman.

“Jaehaerys.” Her barked command had him standing to attention immediately. He knew better than to cause this woman any ire. Her bright violet eyes raked down his form, dressed in simple breeches and a light shirt in his dream form. “Though you are of the north.” Here she paused to throw a sidelong look at his Stark ancestors. “You have the build of a Targaryen. As such our fighting techniques may prove more useful to you. So I will be training you on some of the forms used by our side of the family. The first form is very similar to what that YiTi man was teaching you. Move your feet should width apart…”

Jon followed every instruction to a T. The movements were jilted at first, but soon he could indeed see the similarities to the fighting style Chin had been imparting upon him. With each step performed his body began to flow more rhythmically from move to move, almost like dancing (which he was atrocious at according to Sansa). The entire time Visenya watched him closely, correcting any mistakes efficiently. Her teaching style reminded him greatly of Ser Rodrick, which in turn made him more comfortable.

Jon got the feeling Queen Visenya was used to people underestimating her or even disrespecting her because of her gender. Jon had never felt women were beneath him, or couldn’t fight like many men throughout the world believed. He’d seen Maege Mormont wipe the floor with Great Jon Umber more than once in his time at Winterfell to ever believe women couldn’t be dangerous if properly motivated. He also knew well that some of the most dangerous women didn’t fight physically; instead they used their wit and guile. Truthfully he felt more wary of that type of people, for you never knew their true strength.

When he first started training in the dream world he had thought it rather redundant, for surely learning moves here would not affect him in the real world. How would he gain any muscle memory, aside from training each day going over the forms learned? However, when he woke after the first few nights his body felt sore as if he had trained in his actual body. This had frightened him.
If he got injured in the dream realm, was his true body injured as well? What if the Walker had grabbed him that one time? What would have happened to his body?

So many questions and no solid answers.

Finally, after hours of work Visenya called an end to their session. Jon practically dropped to the ground; sweat dripping from his skin.

“You did well,” the queen praised. “I wish I had more recruits who had your dedication back in the day. Certainly would have made my life easier. Your footwork’s still sloppy though.”

Jon almost snorted but managed not to. This was also very much a typical trait for his ancestors on both sides. Every praise he earned had a barb at the end of it. Clearly they did not want him to get a big ego, which they were doing a great job of keeping deflated.

Then again he had no doubts as to why they were training him.

They had made it clear from the beginning they were training him to fight the Walkers and the Night King. He was not learning how to rule, or govern like many of their family had done in the past. He was being trained for war, pure and simple. He also knew very well that he would likely not survive this battle, and why should he? Bastards were not good for anything but the battlefield or whoring, according to most people he had known. Otherwise his ancestors could be focusing of Viserys, Daenerys or Robb.

But… if this would save his family, his living family, then he would willingly go to his death to stop this coming evil.

“You don’t have the run the poor boy into the ground Vi,” a lighter voice chided from the side.

Glancing over he saw Queen Rhaenys and King Aegon watching, propped against the ghost of Balerion, Aegon’s dragon.

Even with dreaming of Giants and Mammoths, seeing actual dragons and even direwolves in his dreams still left him breathless. Both creatures were magnificent and both held a pull over his heart.

“He can’t learn if we coddle him,” her sister wife bit back, earning an eye roll.

“Now, now there is no reason to fight,” Bran the Builder chided lightly, his calm grey eyes locking on Jon. “I understand you are leaving to continue your journey in the morning Jon?”

“Yes sir,” he responded politely, always making sure to say sir, or ma’am or your grace where necessary. Many had told him to drop the titles as he was family, but he didn’t feel comfortable doing such. It was not right for one of his station to address these great men and woman informally.

“Ugh! Why are you going to Volantis,” Ben Stark cried in frustration. “You should go to Braavos again. Maybe see if you can find the Company of the Rose. They were formed by Northerners that left after this lot.” He gestured to the Targaryen conquerors sarcastically. “Forced Torrhen to bend knee, because he was too gutless to take on a dragon!”

“Excuse me for wanting our people to live,” Torrhen growled at the man. “As if you would have done any different if you’d been alive, which I add you were not.”

“Volantis is close to Valyria which is where Jon must go,” the wispy voice of Daenerys the Dreamer drifted over them. “There he will find what he needs to help defeat the Long Night.”
“And why can’t his name sake do it,” Ben asked incredulously, glaring pointedly at King Aegon. “He is closer.”

Jon frowned in confusion. Namesake? The only one who had been born named Aegon in the past century was…

“My bro… Prince Aegon is alive,” he interrupted the bickering causing them all to go silent. Many shot Ben a look that clearly showed their annoyance with his inability to keep silent.

“Yes,” Rhaenys answered, moving to kneel before Jon. “Your brother, Aegon is alive. He is in hiding with a man named Jon Connington, a friend of your father. He too will have a part to play in the war to come.”

Jon felt his face blank out. It had taken a while to learn the trick, but it had helped in guarding his thoughts from others.

Of course his half-brother Aegon had a part to play. No doubt he would be taking the Iron Throne back over and becoming King. He was the trueborn heir after all. Jon was just the mistake born from the union of a besotted girl and a man looking to create a weapon to fulfill his prophecy. There was no way they’d risk Aegon on this dangerous path. However, he at least now had a way to keep Art and Oz from following him to Valyria. Once he got to Volantis he would need a way to show Aegon was alive, and no doubt the two Kingsguard would be anxious to find their true liege. Yet how would he get the proof he needed without telling them of the dreams?

“Would the Iron Bank know this,” he asked suddenly, the thought forming lightening quick. He knew the Targaryens and even the Starks had accounts with the infamous bank. They were known for being meticulous about their records and for their confidentiality. If he went to them pretending to be interested in his possible inheritance and ‘happened’ to learn his fath… Rhaeger’s true heir was still alive then he would have irrefutable proof…

“Yes,” Ben responded hesitantly. “Those coin-pinchers know everything about their clients and their families. In fact they are sometimes called upon in a dispute over inheritance, as their records are impeccable.”

“And they would be able to tell if it was really Aegon and not a murmur,” he clarified, keeping his voice as even as possible.

“Indeed,” Visenya remarked dryly, seeming rather annoyed with this topic. “Though I fail to see how it matters. Once the time comes, he’ll get the throne back, you’ll destroy the White Walkers and the realm will be as it should be.”

Right. As it should be. Surely that meant with Jon being far from his blood as possible. He didn’t belong in the north as a bastard and he definitely won’t be welcome in the south. Maybe if he survived he could travel west and see if there really was anything out there. Or if he was lucky he could come back to Essos and ride with Drogo’s Khalasar, if his Aunt Daenerys didn’t have him killed for his Stark blood.

“Why do you ask this Jon,” Aegon asked solemnly, his violet eyes near drilling into Jon’s grey ones.

“Just curious, your grace,” he managed to remark easily.

He could tell the other man didn’t quite believe him. Before he could counter Jon’s claim the world shifted, as it did every night when he was about to wake. The figures of his ancestors grew less defined and he felt his mind waking up. It was a strange process, but one he’d become used to. Still,
he was grateful for it, as he did not wish to face any more questions from them this night. He would need to plan his next steps and make sure none of the dead figured it out.

Then again why would they care? As long as he fulfilled his duty as the ‘promised prince’, they should be pleased.
Ned stood restlessly next to his horse at the place that had been designated for this meeting. It had taken time, nearly four moons to get to this point. First he had sent a letter to Lord Commander Mormont to advise he would be coming to visit and discuss some things with him. He thought it best not to give the Old Bear any hint as to what was going to occur. He then had prepared Robb to act as Lord in his stead, having finally reinstated his son as Heir of Winterfell on his four and ten name day.

His eldest had done him proud as he stoically accepted the honor and promised to uphold the title as he should have before. Ned knew Robb had come far since Jon’s departure and he was very happy that his son had seen the error of his ways and corrected them. He knew now that Robb would be a Lord the north could be proud to call their own, and he felt easier about leaving it to him. This venture would allow Robb to see what being Lord of Winterfell was really like, without the pain and fear Ned had experienced after his father and elder brother had died. With Maester Luwin, Steward Poole and Cat helping him, he knew his son would be fine.

Of course Bran and Arya had begged to come with him since they wanted to see the Wall uncle Benjen always spoke of, but this was not a pleasure visit. The topics he would be discussing and the information he would be checking was far too dangerous for any of his children. Luckily one of his Flint cousins had agreed to come and teach the children the Old Tongue, the Clan leaders pleased to hear they were interested. So at least his children would have something else to help occupy their time.

On the way to Castle Black he had been met by Lords Umber, Glover, Karstark and Lady Mormont. Cat had suggested he call them to join this meeting. If the information was true, then they would require proof. Plus as his most trusted lords, they would be the best equipped to help him with getting the rest of the North on board with his plans. Originally he had planned to verify the information completely before calling on his lords, but a visit from his father in his own dreams had only solidified his belief in Jon’s words. Now he would need the rest to believe it.

Once their groups had converged, all small consisting of only the lord and two to three guards, they had made their way to Mole’s Town then Castle Black where the Old Bear and Benjen greeted them.

It had been an eye opening experience.

Ned had not been to the Wall in some time, too busy with his own duties to truly visit. The last time had been shortly after the Rebellion to verify all of the ‘recruits’ had made it and the Castle had the supplies they needed. It had not been that much better back then, though Ned had thought it was simply because of the influx of men to take the Black. He had been wrong. The castle was in disrepair, men milled about with bleak features and the place stank far more than most castles did. More than one man sent them dark looks, their eyes shifty and dangerous.

This was where he had considered sending Jon? This is what had become of a great brotherhood? The few men with any true honor here were outnumbered by those who simply decided the Black was better than the noose. It was not a promising thought. Several of them looked like half-starved boys, barely into their manhood, or old men missing parts and pieces from cold and battle.

No, Jon would not have done well here. For all that he was known as his bastard, he had an education that these men would resent. His ‘known’ relation to Ned would also harm him, as many of these men had been Targaryen Loyalists in the Rebellion and he could clearly see many of them still blamed him for their loss.
He pushed those thoughts aside for now. Jon was in Essos, far away from these men. Ned had a job to do, because once they verified the threat, these men would be what stood between the dead and the realm of the living.

May the gods help them.

The meeting he had had with his lords, Lord Commander Mormont, Benjen and Maester Aemon Targaryen had been interesting to say the least. He had given a brief synopsis of Jon’s leaving, some knowing more than others. But when he brought out the pictures and depictions he had drawn of the men of the Black and even some wildlings, his companions were properly stirred up. When he read some of the information Jon had provided, the Old Bear, Maester Aemon and his brother had been adequately shocked. When he brought out the pictures of the mammoths and giants, only to have Benjen and the Old Bear confirm their existence his lords nearly rioted. Benjen had even recognized and named a few of the Free Folk, stating quite clearly there was no way Jon could have ever met them. Some had argued Jon must have been beyond the Wall, but none could explain how he knew things about the Black Brothers, when it was proven he’d never been to Castle Black and some of the information shared was known only by a very few. It was the final picture that helped perpetuate the meeting he was currently waiting for.

Flash back:

“Alright, your boy had some dreams about the Wall and the Wildlings,” Lord Commander Mormont huffed gruffly. “Though I don’t usually put any faith in superstition even I can’t deny how disturbing these pictures are. However, I don’t see why this has you up in arms Lord Stark. I agree the Wildings are massing for something, likely trying to get past the Wall for better hunting ground, but it’s not something we can’t handle, even if most of this lot are useless.”

“I agree with Jeor,” Great Jon added. “Besides, my men would be happy to help the Black beat back those motherless cunts to protect our lands. We’ve done it before, we’ll do it again!”

“Crass but true,” Rickard Karstark muttered. “I admit there have been more groups of Wildings trying to raid in the last few years, but nothing we can’t handle.”

“If Jeor needs men for the Wall we can lend a few, gladly,” Maege Mormont added, giving her uncle a smile, which he returned.

“Any of your Lords would be willing to send aid to the Wall without having to come here to see first-hand the possible threat,” Lord Glover murmured thoughtfully, his eyes on Ned as if trying to figure out where his head was. “So what has you so worried milord?”

Ned leaned back in his chair a bit, eying them all stoically hoping he was conveying how serious this was. “In the time since the Wall has been built, when have the Wildings ever come together in a group this large?”

“They haven’t,” Benjen stated assuredly before trailing off.

Ned nodded in agreement. “When have they ever come past the Wall with no intention of returning back there?” None of his lords could answer him. “They are made up of clans.” He waved to the pictures laid on the table before them. “Dozens of them. They war between themselves, they each have their own ways. I admit we would have a few raids a year, but never to this extent, and never have they acted so recklessly. So why are they all coming together, fortifying themselves and preparing to come south of the Wall? It cannot be snow and ice they fear,” he pushed on not letting the others answer his questions. “They have weathered far more of both than any of us have ever seen. From what we can tell even the Giants are gathering with the Wildlings. What could possibly
scare a Giant? What could possibly be causing clans of Wildlings to put aside decades of grudges to come together in a desperate attempt to make it past the Wall?”

Ned noted that his words were making his lords start to truly think about the issue. Benjen and Maester Aemon also looked thoughtful, but Jeor Mormont’s face had grown pale beneath the snowy beard and he held a look in his eye that told Ned the Lord Commander might know more than he let on.

“What… what did Jon see if his dreams,” Benjen asked hesitantly. For all that he was a ranger and lived a dangerous life, Ned knew his brother did not like the idea of something out there that scared Giants.

Slowly Ned pulled out the last drawing, keeping his eyes on Jeor. He placed it down with purpose barely noting the gasps and curses filling the room. No, he was more interested in the look of resigned recognition the Lord Commander had.

“What have you seen one,” Ned asked the older man, not letting anyone else speak.

All eyes turned to the Lord Commander who looked older than his age. “Nay, but I have had reports of sightings. I dismissed them thinking it was just wild imaginations of rangers out too long…”


“But they all had similar details about the creatures,” the man admitted tiredly. “They walked like men, even had their forms. Yet they seem to be white as snow and eyes glowing blue. They could form weapons of ice and raise the dead around them. One even swore he saw one near Crastor’s Keep, picking up one of the babes that cunt left out in the snow…” He slumped a bit, rubbing his eyes in frustration. “I didn’t think it was true, just ravings of men trying to start rumors of something not real…”

“Are any of those men here,” Ned asked calmly. He didn’t blame the other man for writing it off. He would have as well, since such things have not existed in ages.

“Aye, one of my younger recruits,” he advised waving Benjen to go get the lad. “Came back from his first ranging mission babbling about monsters and the dead. He was the only one to come back. Thought a group of Wildings had ambushed them and scared the lad silly.” His eyes drifted to the page. “Maybe I was wrong.”

There was a tense silence that lasted until Benjen came in with a young man, dressed in black with his hands bound. He looked afraid of his own shadow, but managed to pull himself together a bit when he saw Ned and the others. Before anyone could speak the young man’s eyes landed on the picture and he lost all color in his face.

“That’s ‘em! That’s one of ‘em,” he cried frantically pointing at the picture. His eyes were wide with terror. “They killed Gared and Ser Royce! I told you! I told you they were comin’!”

“Lad,” Ned barked, moving to block the man’s view of the picture allowing him to calm down some. “Breath. Now tell, slowly, what happened. What did you see?”

The man shook slightly yet seemed to gather himself just enough to speak. “Ser Royce had me and Gared go with ‘im to scout. The Wildlings, they’ve been more active ya see. So Lord Commander been having us patrol more. We was up past Crastor’s, near the Fist of the First Men. Suddenly it got cold, really cold. Never felt nothin’ like it. The woods, they just went quiet like.” His voice broke slightly as he tried to relay what happened. “Ser Royce was up ahead, when his horse spooked and
he fell off it. He barely rolled to the side to avoid being hit by a massive ice sword. This… creature.”

He nodded towards the drawing. “Came out from the woods and started attacking Ser Royce. Gared went to help but another one came up from the side and ran him through, horse and all. Ser Royce had drawn his sword, but it… it just broke. Shattered into a hundred pieces like it was wood. I… I didn’t stay around, I turn and ran,” he admitted with shame. “I know it was cowardly, but others had to know. There’s somethin’ out there milord. Somethin’ not natural. But no one believes me. They say it was just Wildings dressed up. But it weren’t that. It’s a monster…”

Ned’s lips thinned as he thought over what was said. Ser Royce had been a skilled fighter from what he remembered of the man. His sword had also been made of fine steel. For it to shatter like the lad said was worrying. He looked at the lad now, making sure their eyes were locked. “Thank you lad. We did need to know this information. We are going to find a way to fight against these things. So don’t go doing anything foolish.”

He could tell the lad was gaining strength from his words, which was good. He would hate to have to execute the boy for abandoning his post. “Aye milord.”

“Come with me lad,” Maester Aemon spoke up for the first time. “You can help me consult my books while Lord Stark and the others discuss. And maybe a bit of ale to calm you down.”

Once they left the room a heavy weight seemed to descend.

“What are we going to do about this,” Glover voiced what all of them were thinking.

“We need more information,” Ned stated clearly. He looked at Jeor and his brother. “I need a meeting with Mance Rayder.”

End flashback.
Benjen had gone himself to try and reach out to the Wildings. In the meantime Ned had worked with
Jeor to choose who would go with them from the Black Brothers. He knew even here there were
factions, and they would only listen to those they deemed ‘in charge’. So he’d chosen Jeor, Ser
Alliser Thorne and Bowen Marsh the First Steward. A handful of rangers would go with them, along
with Lord Umber and Lady Mormont. He didn’t want to take all of his lords in case this did not go
well.

They had made it to the designated spot the night before and set camp. Ned had no doubt they were
being watched the entire time. Most of their group was on guard, and the Black Brothers took some
pleasure in taunting the northern men who’d never been past the Wall. Oddly enough none of them
dared to tease Maege or her guard woman. Not that Ned blamed them, both women were scary.

Something large and furry brushed against his side, nudging against his elbow. He startled slightly
but still dug his hand into its fur, scratching away.

It had been very surprising to wake up this morning to find a large Direwolf, of all creatures, curled
up next to him. It was obviously a female and looked quite pregnant, probably due in a moon or two.
The sight of her had alarmed the men that morning, especially those on watch as they hadn’t even
noticed her slip into Ned’s tent. She was a magnificent beast, her head coming almost to his shoulder,
with a heavy muscular frame. When he had first woken to her presence he’d frozen, his grey eyes
locking with her calm yellow gaze. For one long moment he thought he might be meeting his end,
only for her to huff at him and lay back down in the furs, nearly dislodging him from his bedding to
take it for her own.

His face must have been quite humorous given the cackles his brother had indulged in. It was Ned’s
turn to laugh when his younger sibling was tackled by his own wolf, a great brown beast that could
almost be mistaken for a bear. Ned might have worried for his brother’s health if his screams had not
consisted purely of irritation at the creature for licking his face, and demands to stop, which were
promptly ignored. Personally Ned thought the two were perfect for each other. Neither one listened.

Currently both were off to one side, clearly sulking and trying to look as if they weren’t. His new
companion had had enough of their shenanigans this morning and had put both in their place. One
should know never to mess with a pregnant female.

Hopefully Catelyn would let him keep her. Besides, all females like babies, right? And the pups
would most likely sway her…

He was broken from his thoughts by movement in the distance. A group had detached from the
forest area, made up of about two dozen people. He could see the outlines of spears, and they likely
had other weapons. The men and women with him shifted slightly, tense for the confrontation to
come. Neither group had love lost between them, but if this new threat was as he feared, Ned knew
they needed to get over their differences and quickly.

The group stopped a good hundred yards away, more than a few eying the wolf at his side warily.
They were dressed in furs, but Ned could see some minute differences in the style, which made sense
given the different Clans. In fact, he thought he recognized some of the symbols from Jon’s
drawings. He also recognized a few faces, though he kept that to himself. The front man was easily
recognizable for all that Ned had seen him near six years ago.

“Lord Stark,” the man greeted cautiously, his eyes taking in Ned’s group.
“Rayder,” he returned politely, voice even.

“Your Crow brother said you wanted to talk,” Mance started after a long moment of silence. “So talk.”

Ned waved his hand to stop the grumbling behind him. “Aye, and I know he mentioned what it is I wish to speak of,” Ned responded diplomatically. “I need to know if what I fear is real. Are the White Walkers real? Are they preparing an army of the dead to fight the living? Is that why your peoples have come together?”

Mance studied him for a moment, his eyes showing intelligence. “You already know it to be true, though I haven’t the faintest idea how you learned of it. The Crows have ignored the signs or blamed their losses on the Free Folk. So why come to us?”

More than a few men shifted behind him, but Ned ignored them. “Because if I am to have others believe me I need proof. Because I cannot let the Free Folk past the Wall, or gather armies to fight what was once thought a fairytale without it.”

Mance stared at him, his eyes warring between disbelief and hope. His followers however were not trusting.

“And why should we believe a word you say kneeler,” a tall red-haired man spit out disdainfully.

“Watch your mouth cur,” Umber barked at the man. “This is the Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North!”

“There ain’t no lords in the real north,” the other scoffed. “You’re all a bunch of southern cunts to us.”

“Enough,” Ned snapped to his men, making them back down. His eyes locked on the tall wildling. “I don’t expect you to trust me yet Tormund Giantsbane.” He could immediately see the shock that he’d known the name. “Trust comes with time, and we can all agree there is little trust between our peoples after centuries of strife. However, this threat is far too great to ignore. No, I do not have any love for the Free Folk, I have had too many men not come home to allow that. But this battle is not one between men. This is a battle with creatures not seen until recent times, and is now thought of as a scary story. We don’t have time for petty differences any more if this threat is what I think it is. So I ask again, what information can you give me about the Walkers?”

“Villages further north near the Lands of Always Winter been wiped completely out,” a woman stated suddenly. At the betrayed looks from some of the men around her she snorted. “He’s right and you idiots know it. I’ve got me children to think of and I want ‘em to live. If that means tellin’ the man what he wants ta know then I’ll tell ‘im. No sense wastin’ time with pissin’ contests.”

“Seems men are the same everywhere,” Maege commented dryly, sharing a knowing smirk with the other woman, much to the affront of the men.

“It’s as Karsi says,” Mance interrupted, throwing a sharp look at his people. “Worse still, those killed have been turned into wights. Nothing stops them but fire. As for the Walkers, we’ve only seen one or two at a time, and even then it is rare. Mostly they use the wights to do their bidding. Since they’re already dead, they just keep coming no matter what you throw at them. Aside from fire, they seem to have trouble moving during the day, they are active at night though.” He signals with his hand and a large giant came meandering out of the woods, two wooden crates on its shoulders. “So your ‘proof’ will have to wait until night fall.”
Ned nodded in understanding, his eyes drinking in the form of the giant. They stood on two feet like men and had the same limbs, but there was a distinct difference in the structure of their faces. Of course, the abnormal size also clearly differentiated them from men.

“It is my understanding that Giants speak the Old Tongue,” he asked Mance quietly.

“Aye that they do.” The other man was looking at him like he was trying to dissect him. “You seem to know a lot about our people for someone who has never been this far north before. You also know a lot about what is going on here, considering the Crows are ignoring the truth.”


“Well, how do ya know it then,” Tormund demanded petulantly. Jon had been right, this one did have a temper.

Ned pulled out the sheets of paper with Jon’s drawings. “My son sent me these with his last letter…”

“I had not heard of any of your sons joining the Watch,” Mance muttered in confusion. “Nor have any of them been on this side of the Wall.”

“Aye, Jon is in Essos,” Ned confirmed. He then passed over the pictures of some of the Free Folk and the giants. “In his last letter he told me about dreams he’d been having. Dreams of the Wall and beyond.” He noted more than one Wildling looks up at that, their eyes wide with… reverence? They did not question him on this? Why? Holding his questions for the moment he continued. “He also indicated he has seen the evil stirring in the far north in the Land of Always Winter. He fears we will not survive if we do not work together. I am not normally a man to believe in tall tales, but he has offered some convincing proof.” Here he pulled out the picture of the Walker to show them, noting the unease sweeping through the group in front of him. “He is not one to make up stories.”

“Greenseer,” Mance whispered in disbelief. Rumblings echoed through the Wildling ranks.

Ned vaguely remembered stories of such things. It seemed another myth was being proven true.

“Did he see anything else,” Kirsi asked, almost desperately. “They say greenseers can get glimpses of the future.

“I do not know,” Ned admitted. “He is very far away and letters take even longer. I only know he begged me to come here and speak to Mance. That he is worried if we do not try and work together, all of us, all of the realms of men will fall.”

The tense silence was broken when a raven of all things snatched the parchment from Ned’s hand, flying to a tree about thirty meters off. Both Ned’s men and the wildlings reacted, pulling weapons, though neither Direwolf seemed remotely worried. The bird merely watched them, with strange eyes. In fact, it had three eyes. The group was again shocked when it dropped the parchment into the hands of a tiny creature that looked like a living plant. It had childlike features, but exaggerated eyes and its skin looked like the bark of a tree. It had no definitive gender. The creature examined the picture carefully, head cocking at the raven’s caw, as if listening to a comment being made. Bright yellow eyes locked on Ned, freezing him to the spot.

“Your second son drew this,” it asked, the voice soft almost musical.

“Aye,” Ned responded through a now dry throat. First mythical dreams from his nephew, then seeing giants for himself and now… Now he was seeing a Child of the Forest, long thought to have died out.
“Bran’s gifts are awakening far sooner than anticipated,” the Child murmured thoughtfully.

“Bran,” Benjen barked in confusion. “These were drawn by Jon. What do you mean Bran’s gifts?”

“Jon,” the Child parroted, completely ignoring the question about Bran. “You have no child named Jon.”

Ned tensed as did Benjen, the men and women around them moving restlessly, clearly confused by the announcement. How did they know? The Raven cawed again, and the Child nodded in understanding. It turned back to them, eyes wide and a smile curving over the strange features.

“You mean the Prince. We had worried he had perished. Bloodraven had lost sight of him for many years,” it continued on. “He will be needed in the battle against the Long Night. Any other will not defeat the Night King. Where is he?”

“Essos,” Ned muttered. “And what do you mean only he can defeat the Night King? Who is the Night King?”

The Child seemed to confer with the Raven before turning back to them. “The Night King was the first of the Others. He is the strongest and has the power to bring the Long Night. Only with his death will the rest of them fall and the realm be truly safe. Your ancestors could not defeat him before, they could only trap him. But now he is free and gathering his power. Brandon the Builder knew this, so he built the Wall to protect the rest of the realm. It is why the Watch was created, to be the first line of defense. The Free Clans stayed because they did not wish to leave their homes and they did not wish to have others rule over them.” It nodded to the Free Folk. “We have searched for a way to kill the Night King. The Walkers can be defeated by dragon glass and Dragon steel, but the Night King is different. Only a child of Ice and Fire can truly defeat him. There has only been one such child born in this world. His birth told us that the Night King would be working to come back and the Long Night would be on us soon. Magic is already coming back into the world, to prepare for this fight. More wargs are being born.” Here it nodded to the Free Folk, some of which shifted self-consciously. “The direwolves are finding their bonded with the children of Winter.” Here it looked to the two wolves sitting calmly by the Stark brothers. “Soon even the dragons will return.” It paused eyes locking on Ned as if reading into his soul. “Why is the Prince across the sea? Would it not be better for him to be close by to stop the Others?”

Ned wasn’t sure he wanted to answer, yet he strangely felt compelled. “Jon…” The Raven cawed angrily, its three eyes drilling into Ned. He swallowed harshly before correcting himself, trying to ignore the shocked murmurs from those with his party. “Jaehaerys.” The Raven actually nodded, and Ned might have thought that strange if not for the way the rest of this day was going. “Left for personal reasons. Reasons that were in part caused by my family. However, in his letter he has told me he is searching for something to help the north against this foe. He will not leave us to face it alone.”

The Child smiled widely, clearly pleased by the message. Then the Raven cried out one last time flying off from its perch. When the men and women looked back the Child was gone, only the parchment was left. Some men from both groups moved to the tree to see if they could find any signs of tracks, though Ned seriously doubted they would find anything.

“The boy you claimed as your bastard was your sister’s son wasn’t he?”

It was Rayder of all people to figure it out. Ned looked to him, stone faced. Rayder continued. “I saw the boy once. He looked a lot like you I’ll grant, but he was rather delicate for a Stark. And I always thought it strange that they say you came home with your sister’s bones and a child you fathered, when she’d been with Targaryen for so long, and you didn’t seem the type to dismiss any vows you
made. But if what they said about what happened to Targaryen’s children was true, and how Baratheon acted… can’t say I blame you for claiming the boy as your own.”

“He carries the blood of the Starks, we do not abandon family,” Ned stated harshly, daring anyone to challenge him on that.

Many of the Free Folk gave him approving looks. The men and women he’d brought with him to the Wall also seemed to approve of his words. The Black brothers were more split, especially those that had grown up in the southern regions. Those that had been Targaryen supporters seemed flabbergasted at what had been revealed.

“Aye, we feel the same. No child should ever be made to feel less because of their parents’ choices,” Rayder agreed, his eyes trailing to the others with Ned, especially Umber and Mormont. “We don’t buy that southern shite about children being evil or wrong simply because their parents weren’t married. We judge a man, or woman,” he added when Karsi coughed pointedly. “On their own merits and actions.”

Ned considered him for a moment. “It used to be that was on our side of the Wall as well, but we have let too many of the teachings from south of the Neck influence us. I have tried to turn it around since Jon has left. It doesn’t matter how you come into the world, you will die all the same. It is far truer in the north, as we all live a much harsher life.”

Rayder didn’t respond, his eyes drifting to the darkening sky. “Night will fall soon. We’re gonna want to get fires going. Then we can show you your proof.” His eyes drifted to the Black brothers. “Maybe it will be enough to get certain heads out of their arses.”

He turned moving back to a small area where some other Free Folk had congregated, already building a fire and setting up tents. Tormund and the others followed, though the giant red headed man glared at Ned for good measure.

“So Jon Snow should be Jaehaerys Blackfire,” Alliser Thorne bit out once the Free Folk had gotten far enough away. He glared at Ned who merely looked back passively. “You plan on usurping your oafish king and placing him on the throne? Make the Starks the ruling power?”

“You’re out of order Thorne,” Benjen barked angrily.

“You started a rebellion with that fat cunt now sitting on the throne,” Thorne accused bitterly. “You allowed the Prince’s true children to be killed but kept this one illegitimate bastard alive because he’s family? Thousands died, for what? A girl who couldn’t keep her legs together?”

Ned reacted so fast it startled everyone there. He had Thorne by the front of his cloak, the man more than a little startled. “I fought because Aerys murdered my father and older brother, after his son took off with my sister, leaving no word behind as to why. My family had every right to question the Prince on his actions and had Aerys not been insane he would have seen that. Instead he killed them and called for my head as well. I was the oldest and it was my duty to protect my family. At this point the only way to do that was to fight. Had the Prince come to me, had he asked for peace talks I would have done so. Neither myself or the north wanted war and I would not have risked the lives of my people otherwise, but Aerys and Rhaeger did not provide any other acceptable options. As for Rhaeger’s children, yes, I was too late to save them and that haunts me to this day. I called for those men to be arrested and killed for their disgusting act but no one else gave a damn. So when I left to find my sister, hoping to get a piece of my family back only to find her dying of childbirth, you’re damn right I hid her child’s true identity. Not only because he was the son of the man Robert hated above all else, but because he was a true born son who could challenge Robert’s claim and we all know Lannister would never have allowed that.” He threw Thorne back causing the man to stumble,
his face white and eyes wide as he took in the words. “As for the throne, I would never curse anyone to that abomination. That throne has done nothing but bring death and despair to the Starks and the north, and no child of our blood will suffer that if I can help it.”

He unconsciously felt his wolf come up beside him on the right and Benjen standing to his left with his wolf. From the corner of his eyes he saw Great Jon and Maege shifting slightly, moving to show their support of their liege lord. Letting his grey eyes meet each man there to convey his seriousness, he finally stopped once more on Thorne. “Jon,” he emphasized. “Is MY son. I raised him, and he is of the north. And if anyone brings harm to him in ANY way, they will find out why the Starks are known as wolves.”

Without another word he turned and moved to his horse leaving dead silence in his wake.
chapter 25 Eddard

Ned was glad to be home after months away. Once the business at the Wall was concluded, for the moment, they had headed back to Winterfell. His Lords and Lady Mormont all agreed to muster their people and start fortifying their holds. They would also write to the other lords in the North and warn them of the same. This would only help to enforce the letters Ned planned to send. Umber and Karstark would look over the Gift and New Gift for possible places for the Wildlings… Free Folk to settle. Neither lord were thrilled with the idea, but the proof given was too horrifying to ignore. While Karstark had not been there to see the wights, Great Jon wasted no time giving full details to the man about what they had seen. No doubt had Ned and Maege not been there to back the man’s words, the others would have suspected Great Jon of being drunk. In the end no one wanted to face hundreds of thousands of dead Wildlings, which would occur if they were not let past the Wall.

He also knew his four lords now knew Jon’s true identity, though thankfully they were all loyal enough to Ned to not say anything to anyone else. They also agreed to keep it a secret, many of them remembering Lyanna and refusing to harm a child she had clearly loved. Maester Aemon had had a few words for him about Jon’s ‘status’, but otherwise was grateful his many times great-nephew had been saved from Baratheon’s wrath. He also offered to give the boy any advice or just an ear to talk to once he returned to the north. If only Aemon Targaryen had taken the throne perhaps the rebellion would never have happened…

When he had departed from the Wall they had some rudimentary plans together, which he would discuss further with his Maester and Steward upon his return. He had already started formulating the letter he would send to Robert, requesting the other kingdoms stop ignoring the taxes they owed to the Watch. Perhaps they could send payment in the way of masons and builders, or supplies. It would certainly help in the end.

He would have been home weeks sooner except for two unexpected events. The first was notice from his spies at the Dreadfort. Apparently Ramsey Snow had attempted to kill his half-brother, Domeric Bolton, the heir to Roose Bolton. Thankfully his spies had caught on to the plan and managed to thwart it. Dominick was a much better prospective ruler than the younger bastard and definitely a better choice than his father. He’d already heard reports of Ramsey’s hobbies and Roose’s willingness to ignore said actions.

Not after this little stunt. The boy had been chained and thrown in the dungeon for daring to try and kill Roose’s heir. Even if Domeric was a bit softer than Roose wanted, he was still his first-born son. Even Roose followed the northern rules of caring for your own kin, but he would never allow one to harm the other. Too bad Ramsey never learned that lesson.

While Ned didn’t like having to dispense such justice, he could not ignore such an act, and frankly he was glad the boy was gone from the world. There was something… not right about him. Many of the little folk seemed to breathe much easier after his head was removed, lending credence to the rumors he’d been hearing about him and the men under his limited command.

At least this incident would mean Roose would be more inclined to toe the line than he had in the past. Especially as Ned could have held him responsible for his son’s actions instead of sparing him. Granted he wouldn’t trust the man as far as he could throw him, but he did trust Roose knew Ned was keeping a very close eye on him now. After all, no one from the Dreadfort had been sent to notify Ned of the issue, he’d merely shown up.

The other small hitch in their travel plans came when Storm, his new companion, went into labor. Like a female of any species she was not thrilled about it. Still she managed to bring six new lives
into the world. The smallest, a tiny white thing, was almost rejected, yet at the last moment Storm accepted the pup. Jory had commented that it must be a sign from the gods as Ned had six children and his new wolf just birthed six pups. Privately Ned agreed.

They had lost time as they had to cart the new mother and her litter back to the Keep, but he felt it would be worth it in the end. The Children of the Forest had said the direwolves were coming back and finding their bonded, which seemed to mean those of Stark blood. This would give his children protectors that could never be corrupted. That is… once he got Cat to agree…

The welcome home was typical for when he’d been away for many moons. Poor Robb looked so relieved to see him that he could barely suppress a laugh. Seemed the boy had learned just how hard it could be to lead the entire North, as well as run Winterfell. The others had been pleased to see him too, though he lost his three youngest attention the moment the cart pulled into the yard and the yaps of the pups could be heard. Even Sansa had only managed a quick hug and hello before moving to inspect the contents of the cart. Their gasps of awe and joy did very little to curb the pointed look Cat sent his way.

“Direwolves? Really Ned?”

Thankfully she was just as weak as he was when the children pulled their own puppy eyes on her, especially when they worked in tandem. Of course he had to lay down some rules and explained they would be expected to care for the pups themselves and no one else would help them.

“But there are six,” Bran had spoken up suddenly, already cuddling one with a brown coat. “Who will take care of the white one?”

Indeed all of the children had claimed a wolf but the tiny white runt, which strangely was the only one to have opened its eyes. They were a blood red, which chilled and mesmerized in turns.

“I will,” Robb had offered immediately, his eyes now solemn has he picked up the white wolf to hold with his own wriggling mass of grey fur. “This one will belong to Jon when he returns. So it’s only right that I take care of him until he does.”

No one had disagreed with his oldest and in fact it seemed right for the white wolf to be Jon’s, even if he was not there to lay claim. Still, he was proud of all of his children. In the weeks since his return they had done very well in caring for their new companions and none of them ever shirked the duty. Even little Rickon would refuse help when caring for his own pup, which was nearly half his size already. It proved an excellent way for them to learn responsibility.

The rest of his time was spent filling in his Maester, Master at Arms, his Steward and his wife on just what he and the others had learned. It was grim news to say the least. Some were a bit more skeptical, but the detailed drawings did help to curb the disbelief. All could agree that Jon would never make something like this up, especially when it concerned the safety of his family and the people of the north. Already they were discussing plans for reinforcing the walls and possibly building further defense structures. Steward Poole was working with Cat on the finances, to which Ned showed them the hidden cache the Starks always kept for such emergencies. Thankfully it had not been used in some time, so they would have a good amount to help them. Ser Rodrick had drilled him and Jory on what the Free Folk indicated the capabilities of the wights and the Walkers were, though they had little information on the latter. However, what they did know was being utilized in training the men. Maester Luwin had commandeered old Nan into his tower and had the woman tell him all the tales she could remember in far more detail than she usually went into. From the smug grin he could tell she was enjoying it. Truthfully they were lucky they had anyone that remembered the old tales.
It was a busy month after his return, running the north, preparing his people for the inevitable fight with supernatural creatures, sending missives to Robert (or more accurately Jon Arryn as Robert never really did any work), and fielding questions from his lords that had not been on the jaunt north of the Wall but were now receiving the news. Some days he barely had time to sit with his family for a meal. So when he finally got a moment to steal away to the Gods Wood he took it gratefully.

He sat nestled in the roots of the Heart Tree overlooking the hot pool next to it. He had Ice in his hands, carefully cleaning the blade, more out of habit than the need to. His mind wandered over all the things that had changed these past few years, and what he had learned recently. The presence the Heart Tree exuded filled him with hope that the gods really did listen and were on their side. All his life he had heard the words Winter is Coming. His family had always thought it simply meant the promise of harsh times that one had to prepare for to overcome and reach the Spring. Yet now it took a darker turn. It was still a promise, but one that seemed to have no expectation of life afterwards.

If only he had known this was what his father was trying to tell him in the crypts. He had alluded to Jon’s destiny, had mentioned he was the first child to share the blood of two great houses. The Child of the Forest had made a comment about him as well, calling Jon the Prince. But Ned had not been sure if it was because he truly was a prince, or if it hinted at something more. Either way, Ned had not liked the fact the creature seemed to think Jon was the only one able to defeat this so-called Night King.

His thoughts were interrupted when Cat joined him, sitting cautiously on the roots across from him.

“Is everything well,” he asked in concern, catching sight of the parchment in her hand.

“Yes, all is well. However, we have received some surprising news,” she informed him, clearly not sure how to regard the missive she held out to him.

He cocked a brow when he noted the Martell sigil. In all honesty he had expected a message from Robert or Jon Arryn demanding to know why he was kicking up a fuss about the south sending proper payments to the Watch. Not that he wouldn’t get one, but never in all his years have the Martells ever written to them.

He handled the parchment as one might a deadly snake. Considering the sender, no one could blame his caution.

“It will not bite you husband,” Cat scolded him playfully. “Though the information inside is a bit surprising.”

“Oh?” He turned to her hoping maybe he could avoid reading it all together, only to receive a flat look for his efforts. Huffing a bit childishly he finally read the letter. With each sentence his eyes grew wider and wider. It admittedly took three readings before the content actually sunk in, causing him to groan in frustration. “Of all the times for the Red Viper to grow curious about the north he chooses NOW?”

“So it would seem,” Cat remarked in a way that had him doubting.

“You do not think so?”

“I think it is strange that a man known for staying to warm climates suddenly comes to visit us after we have sent out missives requesting the other realms to pay their taxes to the Wall,” she intoned calmly. “There is also the fact that Jon is in Essos, a place Oberyn Martell has been known to frequent. We have no idea the contacts the man has there, or what he has heard about Jon or his companions. It could very well be Prince Oberyn is coming to ask… uncomfortable questions.”
“Aye,” Ned agreed tiredly. “He’s abrasive enough to do it too.” He studied his wife for a moment. Though she usually ignored any natural born children, as long as they were not Ned’s, he knew Oberyn Martell liked to take his paramour and his own bastards with him in his travels. Whether to test the patience of various nobles or to stick it to their sensibilities he did not know. “He will definitely have some of his children with him, and possibly his… partner…”

Cat snorted in an unlady-like fashion. “Of course he will. Dorne does not see having children outside of marriage as dishonorable,” she sniped primly. Then her shoulders slumped a bit, remorse and guilt flooding her features. “And they would be right. The children should not be punished for their parent’s actions, nor should they be judged by anything but their own merits. It seems I am finally learning this lesson. Perhaps if the rest of the realm thought in such a fashion then Jon…”

Ned reached out and grasped her hands. “We cannot change the past, but we can better ourselves for the future. I am glad that Jon’s departure has made others remember how people should be treated, regardless of birth. I also have no doubt that one day our family will be able to reconcile with Jon.”

“But what if we can’t,” she whispered harshly. “You said he is supposed to fight the leader of the Others. So much can happen from now to then. He could… you could…”

“You are right,” he admitted. “Anything can happen. But as long as we have hope, there is always a chance for a better future. Our family is full of fighters. We will not fall so easily.” He leaned forward pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. “For now we must prepare for an invasion of sand snakes, so you can show Arya your prowess in genteel combat.”

Cat huffed on a laugh batting at his arm in mock anger.
Bran carefully traversed the eastern wall of the keep in order to catch a glimpse of the coming visitors. Their father had told them nearly a fortnight ago that they would be hosting visitors from Dorne. All of them were excited about the prospect, especially as the one coming was the famous Red Viper, Prince Oberyn Martell. He and Arya had begged Maester Luwin for stories about the warrior, Rickon becoming enthused due to their own excitement.

Sansa had seemed a bit put out at first, unsure of the man given his reputation and his numerous children from different women, but the idea of having such exotic guests appealed to her. Robb was more cautious about the whole ordeal, knowing the Prince was bringing some of his daughters with him, all Sands by birth. The heir of Winterfell seemed worried about how they would receive him given his slights against his own bastard brother. Bran didn’t know how the prince or his brood would act, though he doubted they would be warm to Robb, given their own view of natural born children.

Bran had never really understood what was wrong with children being born out of wedlock in any case. Sure, one should always respect any vow they state, especially to another. So breaking a marriage vow was wrong. But there were many children born with neither parent married and still they were looked down upon, as if they were evil. But the idea seemed absurd. No one was born evil. Jon certainly wasn’t evil. He’d always taken time to help Bran or Arya or Rickon with whatever they needed, even if that was just to spend time with him. He played with them, read them stories, helped with their training, and even let them sleep in his bed when scared. Those were not the actions of someone evil.

He had been very cross with Robb when his and Theon’s actions had finally driven Jon to running away. Jon had been a far better older brother than Robb had been for many years, and to lose him had hurt deeply. Over time he had lost his anger at Robb, but he couldn’t say just yet that he fully forgave his brother for his actions. His treatment of Jon had been deplorable and just down right mean. No one should be treated that way, especially not a member of your family, trueborn or not. Maybe when Jon returned he would let go of the rest of the grudge he held, but even then he was not sure. It would depend on what Robb did to prove to Jon he was sorry.

At least he had Jon’s letters to help ease the pain of missing his older brother. He liked how Jon never treated any of them like kids, unlike most everyone else in the keep. Sure they were young and often couldn’t be told things, but at least Jon never tried to lie about it. He would be up front and tell them the truth. Sure they would gripe and complain, but it was better to be treated with the truth than have people act like they were simpletons. Then again, Arya was pretty stupid. Especially when she hogged the arrows for archery practice. Now she was spending more time with their mother, learning how to prepare a keep for guests. She said she was learning how to battle the way women did, but Bran didn’t quite believe her. Their mother never used any kind of weapons that he could see.

Currently his mother was working with the servants to get the final touches for their guests settled. According to their father they should be arriving sometime today, which is why he was trying to get a peek. His bright blue eyes swept the horizon where the sky met the end of the King’s Road. Still no sign of any travelers.

A sharp bark caught his attention and he turned to look down at his Direwolf pup that sat patiently waiting for him in the yard. His pup had grown over the past few months and was now the size of an adult dog, but still only a puppy. Father had warned them they would get much larger, especially if their mother was anything to go by. It had taken him almost a month before he finally settled on the...
name Summer. It just seemed to fit the brownish wolf.

“No I don’t see anything yet,” he called down to his constant companion. “I’ll give it a few more minutes before…”

The sharp blow of a horn from further down the battlements caught his attention. He saw some of the guards gesturing to those below and one ran into the keep. Turning his gaze back to the road he could finally see a speck of bright orange and red against the normally drab backdrop of the King’s Road. He squinted, straining his eyes to get a better look, but still the figures were too far away to get a good look. He knew it would take a good hour for them to reach the Keep, so it was pointless to keep looking, but he still tried.

“Bran!” He jerked slightly at his father’s stern tone. “Get down from there before your mother sees and takes both our heads!”

“But father! I can see the Dornish party,” he argued back, pointing as if his father could see too, though he was on the ground.

“Aye, and you’ll be seeing them up close in an hour or less, so down,” his father shot back. “And try to make yourself presentable? I would like our visitors from the south to think we are not actual wolves.”

Bran grinned brightly, deftly slipping down the wall to join his father on the ground. Summer ran over to him, bumping against his legs in greeting. “But we are wolves!”

His father chuckled, ruffling his hair. “Aye true enough. Still, best to keep that as a surprise. Don’t want anyone knowing all our secrets. Go on now.”

Sooner than he thought possible the whole family was lined up as well as most of the household. Bran fidgeted slightly in his place between Arya and Rickon, his younger brother looking confused as to why they had to stand there. All of them were dressed in their better outfits, as their mother had demanded. Only Sansa enjoyed dressing up; the rest of them would rather be in their normal clothes playing in the woods. He really wished Summer could be with him, but their mother had refused to allow it, worried how the wolves would react to the guests and vice versa. Father had promised they could retrieve them from the kennel soon enough, but they need to warn their visitors first.

The main gate opened allowing the colorful party through. Their horses were a bit smaller than northern breeds, but still powerful. The group was dressed in reds, golds, yellows and oranges that were said to be the main colors of Dorne. They had fine pelts, clearly not well used like most Northerners owned, and they were much thicker than what any of them would wear in the summer. He remembered Maester Luwin telling them about the difference in temperatures in the north verse the rest of the seven realms and Essos. Dorne was said to be one of the hottest places in Westeros.

Their clothes were not the only differences. The men and women that traveled with the prince all had dark skin, some so dark it looked like coal, others more of a creamy brownish color. Most of the guards carried spears, which was not a popular weapon in the north.

The Prince was easy to spot even if he hadn’t rode in the front. The man just exuded confidence and strength. He was lean, with a medium build. He had a neatly trimmed beard that followed his jaw line to an equally neat goatee. No man in the north would ever wear a beard in such a fashion, but it fit the prince. His eyes were dark yet also had an intelligent gleam, much like father and Maester Luwin. Bran had heard the man had studied at the Citadel for a time.

He dismounted in a move that was graceful and fluid and Bran hoped he’d one day be able to match.
Instead of greeting his father he helped a beautiful woman, who had also ridden a horse instead of a wheelhouse, down from her mount. She had smooth skin and some sort of paint on her face to accent her eyes and mouth. Bran didn’t quite understand why as she would likely be pretty without it. Perhaps this was one of those mysterious things about women Jon had mentioned once? Behind them three more women dismounted, though upon closer inspection they seemed closer to Robb’s age, so maybe not quite women. All of them wore trousers and some form of armor. Beside him he could feel Arya practically vibrating in excitement. Just great, now he’d have to listen to her go on and on about these warrior women. As if he didn’t hear enough about the Mormonts.

“Lord Stark,” Prince Oberyn called out as he approached his parents. “Thank you for having us here at Winterfell. I have heard much about this great fortress but have never had the pleasure of seeing it for myself. I admit, the stories do not do it justice.”

“I thank you Prince Oberyn, and welcome you and yours to our Keep,” his father replied politely, his tone a bit more formal than one he’d use for his banner men. “Our hospitality is yours. May I introduce you to my wife, Catelyn, my heir Robb, my daughters Sansa and Arya, and my sons Bran and Rickon.”

“A pleasure,” the prince greeted them, nodding to each. He then guided the woman and his girls to his side. “This is my paramour Ellaria Sand.” The woman curtsied in a smooth motion, a pleasant smile on her face. “And my daughters, Obara, Nymeria, Tyene and Sarella.”

Bran blinked having not seen the fourth daughter before, but sure enough, hiding slightly behind the one introduced as Obara was a young girl, perhaps his or Arya’s age, shyly peeking out at them. His parents welcomed them all as tradition dictated, but Bran could admit to being a bit bored by this point. His eyes had wandered to the soldiers that had accompanied the party, wondering how different their fighting styles were from the northern soldiers when a small voice caught his attention and that of his siblings.

“This is where Jon grew up?”

His blue eyes locked on the small form of Sarella instantly. “You know Jon?”

“Have you seen him?” Arya joined in the inquisition moving towards the girl in excitement, Rickon close on her heels. “Is he okay?”

“Where did you meet him,” Bran added, moving beside his siblings.

“Did his hair grow back? Is it still curly?”

“Is his tattoo really blue or is it another color?”

“Did you meet Master Art and Master Oz too?”

“Did…”

“Children!” The barked command from their father had them freezing instantly, turning to look at the man. He wore the usual look of exasperation he got around the three of them. Bran didn’t know why, they were just asking questions. Their mother didn’t look too thrilled with their behavior either, but the prince and his companion were both grinning in amusement. “Our GUESTS, have only just arrived from a very long time on the road. Perhaps we could give them a chance to rest and refresh themselves before asking those questions. And ONLY if they allow you to.” His grey gaze drilled into them to emphasize his order.

“Yes father,” all three of them mumbled. Turning back to the young girl he could see she looked
more than a bit startled by their quick shot questions. They all murmured apologies to her, which she gracefully if a bit confusedly accepted.

Prince Oberyn chuckled, his tone deep and surprisingly warm. “Do not worry so little pups. We do indeed bring news of your brother that we will be happy to share with you later. But as your father stated we have been on the road for some time. This is actually Sarella’s first time traveling so far by horse.”

“Lucky,” Arya huffed with a slight whine. “We’ve only been to White Harbor.”

Bran watched as his father sighed in resignation and his mother nearly rolled her eyes at her daughter’s behavior. The prince and his companion just laughed, not seeming to mind in the least.

Soon they were shooed away while their parents and Robb escorted their guests. He noted how the older Sand girls eyed Robb warily, as well as his brother’s hesitant looks in return. Bran wondered if Jon said something to them or if their information came mostly from rumor. He knew that word had gotten out that Jon had run away to the other northern lords and his grandfather Lord Tully, but he wasn’t sure how far south the news had gone.

Deciding not to worry about it he ran off with Arya and Rickon to the kennels hoping to see Summer before the feast that evening.
chapter 27 Sarella

Though Sarella had been to the lands of Essos before this was her first time visiting Volantis. Her father and mother had brought her along when they escorted her older sister Nymeria here to meet with her mother. Her other sisters had declined the chance to travel, deciding to stay back in the Water Gardens, with Obara watching over the younger ones. Sarella though wanted to see what Volantis was like, after all the stories Nym had told her about the place.
So far it had met expectations and also destroyed them. The city was huge, with a large black wall glittering in the sun from the dragon glass, circling a portion of it. People from all over seemed to move around the city, as well as horses and elephants used by the people. The clothing was just as colorful as those back home, though the tailoring and embroidery was vastly different. There were also slaves here, easily spotted by the multitude of tattoos decorating their faces. She had not liked the idea of slavery, but her father said it was the way of the Free Cities and they could not interfere with the laws there.

They had arrived three days ago, the first two spent visiting with Nymeria’s mother, and the last walking through the market place. Today her parents had decided to enjoy a leisurely morning in the villa they had rented for their stay, and Sarella was left to her nursemaid, Ms. Ayne. She didn’t mind the older woman, but sometimes she was very boring, always going on about how she should be a lady and work on her sewing. Didn’t the woman know she was a Sand Snake? One day she would be able to wield a weapon just like her sisters. What would she need sewing for then?

Still she was nice enough to take her to one of the small parks nearby, which overlooked the banks of the Rhoyne and further down the docks. One of her father’s men followed them a few paces back, keeping a lookout for any danger. So even though she didn’t want to, she tried to focus on her sewing lessons, since Ms. Ayne had been kind enough to let her come outside to enjoy the warm weather.

It wasn’t so bad, as Ms. Ayne told her stories about Volantis while they worked. Still, she knew her stitches were nowhere near the quality Ms. Ayne wanted. It really was very bothersome.

She didn’t know how long they had been there when she heard a loud grunt and the sound of something falling to the ground. Turning she found her guard crumpled to the floor, blood spreading out from under him and a large man standing over his body with a bloody sword. Her mind seemed to freeze at the sight, not quite sure what was going on. A scream from behind her caught her attention as she saw Ms. Ayne fighting the grip of another man, a dagger suddenly in her hand trying to stab her attacker. Part of her was immensely proud of her nursemaid, she didn’t think the woman had it in her.

“Run you foolish girl!” Her nursemaid’s command finally broke her out of her shock and she darted away, knowing full well she was no match for their attackers. Part of her hated this truth, hated leaving the woman behind, knowing she was likely to end up dead like her guard. She clenched her eyes at the thought; still she pushed on. Ms. Ayne had told her to run and she would not disobey her. She knew very well what could happen if she was caught by the men, her parents and older sisters had made it very clear to her so she understood the dangers of traveling.

The man that had killed her guard grabbed for her, but she deftly ducked his attempt, swiftly running away from him. He promptly gave chase, joined by a third man. Vaguely she could hear Ms. Ayne’s cut off yell. Tears welled in her eyes as she realized the woman was no more. Yet she did not stop running.

Her heart pound in her chest as she tried to out maneuver the three men chasing her. She could hear
their curses as she knocked things into their path to slow them down. Still, she was only a child and her energy was running out. Just as she was coming to the end of the ally, about to reach the more crowded street by the docks a large hand grabbed her arm in a punishing grip. The jerk caused her to stumble and lose her footing. She would have fallen had the man not pulled her back, throwing her into the wall of the building. She wished she had simply fallen, given the pain of the impact.

She wanted to cry out but the breath had been knocked from her.

“Gave us bit o’ trouble didn’t ya brat,” one of the men sneered above her. His foot came into contact with her stomach where she had crumbled to the ground. This time she had enough air to cry out in pain. He kicked a second time, seeming to enjoy her pain.

“Enough Bale,” another chided. “We got ta get ‘er to the ship. We’re not supposed ta harm ‘er.”

“What does it matter if she’s a bit roughed up,” Bale growled petulantly. “Just gonna sell ‘er to tha’ rich bastard anyway. Bit young fer a tumble, don’t ya think?”

“Don’t matter what I think, just that I get paid,” the other man snapped. “An’ none of us will if Harper don’t get the brat.”

Sarella shook with pain and fear, tears streaming down her face. These men had been sent for her specifically. But why? She didn’t know this Harper person and she was just a Sand. Sure her father was a prince of Dorne, but no one would dare harm any of his children. Or so she had thought.

When rough hands pulled her up she tried struggling and kicking, only to receive a harsh backhand for her trouble. She could taste copper in her mouth and the heat of bruises swelled along her delicate cheek. She wasn’t wearing any of her house colors of sigil either as her father had cautioned her not to, so it was unlikely anyone would help her.

Her father would come for her, she knew that much. But would he be able to find her? As the men started dragging her out of the alley her fear skyrocketed. The man that had remained silent had tied her wrists together in a thick rope that dug into her skin, drawing blood. No matter how much she tried to wriggle out of the binds they only tightened.

“Hel…” He feeble scream was cut short by another slap.

“Shut your mouth girl, or I’ll cut your tongue out,” Bale threatened darkly, looming over her small form.

“You’ll be letting her go, is what you’ll be doing,” a strong husky voice called down the alley.

The men all turned to see who had dared to speak to them. Sarella shifted slightly, her view blocked by the men. She couldn’t make out who had addressed them, but she knew it was not her father. Still, she now had some hope that she would be saved.

“You best be walking away boy,” the third man rumbled warningly. “There’s three of us and only one of ya. This won’t end well for ya.”

“I’ve had worse odds, and I’m not letting brigands such as yourself harm an innocent child,” her savior replied calmly. While his voice was nothing like her father’s his calm tone certainly reminded her of the Red Viper when he was exceptionally angry and preparing to use violence. He spoke calmly then too, which her mother always said meant he was very focused.

“Kill ‘im,” the man who seemed in charge told Bale.
Bale just grinned pulling out his sword and charging her savior. The other two men turned away, obviously thinking Bale would win. There was the sharp clang of metal against metal and then the sound of flesh tearing and a groan that ended abruptly. More tears fell at the thought of her savior being dead. She tried to look back, but the other two men continued to block her view.

The sound of approaching footsteps had the hair on her neck standing up.

“That was fast,” the man to her left grumbled. “Usually ya play with ‘em a bit longer… Ah!”

A loud smack echoed as a fist met the man’s face when he turned to speak to his companion. The man on her right jerked back in shock, pushing her against the wall. Sarella hugged the bricks as she watched her savior battle the man, the other trying to pick himself off the ground from the hit he took. Her eyes widened in joy as she watched her savior dance around his opponent. Only to cry out in warning when the second man finally made it to his feet and attacked her savior from the back. Yet her savior was a good warrior, he moved to avoid the strike and blocked another. He was quick and efficient, ending one man before finishing the other. In mere moments it was all over and her attackers were defeated.

She watched as he checked both men, a frown forming on his surprisingly young face. He was not like anyone she had ever met. His face was long and he had shoulder length curly brown hair, with what looked like streaks of white throughout. He had a scruffy looking beard, though it didn’t seem to be growing much. He was not very tall, maybe average but also looked delicate like some of the dancers she had seen in the past. However, he clearly had skill with the way he took care of her abductors.

“Are… are they dead,” she asked quietly, voice shaking with lingering fear.

Two grey eyes snapped to her, softening greatly once they locked onto her own brown orbs. He moved over slowly, making all of his moves clear, as he knelt in front of her.

“Aye, they will never bother you again milady,” he assured, his voice low and rumbly, with an accent she’d never heard. She liked it.

Gently he removed the bonds on her wrists, hissing slightly at the sight of her wounds.

“Where are your parents?”

“Back at the villa,” she whispered, the tears coming back as she remembered how she got here. “I was out with my nurse and guard… they… they…”

“Sh,” he cooed. “It’s okay. You don’t have to say more. Let me take you back to your parents, aye?”

He carefully stood her up and she thought she could walk, but her legs refused to move. She felt a flash of anger at how helpless she seemed. More tears slipped down her cheeks, though more from frustration than pain or fear. Her savior squatted in front of her, gently wiping them away.

“Now, now, none of that milady,” he coaxed. “We’ll get you home and soon all will be well. What is your name?”

Sarella sniffled, rubbing at the eye that didn’t have the bruise near it. “You’re supposed to introduce yourself first,” she muttered, remembering all of the lessons she had had growing up as a member of the Martell family, bastard or not.

Her savior’s lips twitched up slightly, his eyes now glinting in amusement. It was a good look on him. “Indeed you are correct milady. Forgive my lapse in manners. I am Jon, it is a pleasure to make
your acquaintance, milady.” He lifted her other hand and kissed the knuckles gently. This caused her to giggle a bit, having never truly had anyone except her family do such. “Might I have your name lovely lady?”

She giggled even more, smiling despite the pain in her cheek. “Sarella Sand, milord,” she bobbed into a wobbly curtsy. Suddenly her smile left and she grew serious. “Thank you for saving me.”

“That is a pretty name, milady,” he complimented. His eyes also grew solemn. “You have no need to thank me. But you are welcome in any case.” He paused slightly to let the moment pass, causing Sarella to fidget a bit. “Would you allow me to escort you to your parents?”

She nodded her head, but still her legs refused to move, too tired from her ordeal. For a moment she started to worry, not really sure how to ask her savior, Jon, to further help her. She had already felt so weak and useless that she didn’t know if her pride could take it…

“Would it be alright if I carried you? There are quite a bit of people about and I wouldn’t want to lose you in the crowds,” Jon suggested, making it easier for her to accept.

With a blush she nodded her consent and felt him lift her carefully into his arms. Maybe he had children of his own? He had picked her up just like her mother, easily settling her on his hip, and supporting her weight. In fact his hip seemed to fit well, just like her mother’s did…

Jon maneuvered them out into the main street, being careful to keep her view of the dead bodies limited. Once out he turned left towards the docks.

“Now, we are at the lower docks. Can you tell me where your parents are staying?”

Sarella felt the panic start to return as she glanced left and right. None of this looked familiar. Did she run farther than she thought? She hadn’t been paying too much attention except to get away.

“I…I don’t know.” She bit her lip to try and stave off the new tears.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Jon assured her, one hand rubbing her back soothingly. “Do you remember where you were last?”

She scrunched her nose up. “In a park, overlooking the river and the docks…”

“Do you remember any buildings nearby? “

“Um…the Long Bridge was to our left…”

Jon turned them and pointed down the way. Past the ships she could see the long bridge, though it seemed very, very far away. Her mouth dropped a bit.

“It seems you ran quite a ways little one,” Jon murmured wryly. “So before we set out, why don’t we clean up your wounds and get you a bit to eat, aye?”

Sarella’s stomach growled in agreement, causing Jon to chuckle. He had a very nice chuckle and smile. At her nod he made his way to what looked like a small restaurant. She laid her head on his shoulder, feeling much safer now.
chapter 28 Oberyn

Oberyn was fluctuating between panic and rage. A little over an hour ago some of his men had reported they had found Sarella’s nurse and guard dead, but no sign of his daughter. He had sent his men out and alerted the city guard. Whoever did this would pay dearly for harming one of his family. Yet so far they had found no trace of the girl or her abductors. It certainly didn’t help that the bodies hadn’t been discovered until sometime after the incident. Ellaria was beside herself with worry, her hands wringing together as she tried to remain calm.

His other daughter Nymeria was speaking to some of the city guards, trying to get an idea of where had been searched. He had not wanted to disturb his daughter and interrupt her time with her mother, but he knew if he didn’t tell her it would be worse.

A group of men came back from the section closer to the lower docks. None of them looked happy, in fact they looked downright grim. Oberyn clenched a fist when the leader approached him.

“We found three bodies in one of the allies near the lower docks,” the man reported quietly. “They were taken out by a skilled swordsman. We believe these men were the ones to grab your daughter.”

“And why is that,” he bit out through clenched teeth.

“One was carrying this,” the man explained handing over a piece of parchment.

Oberyn took it and studied it carefully. It was a missive describing his daughter and where the men might find her, as well as instructions on where to take her for ’pick up’. If the man said anything else he could not hear him as the sound of his blood pumping rushed through his ears. The men that took his daughter got off lightly in their death, but the one who ordered it was still out there and they would pay.

“Do you think the one who sent them turned on them,” he asked, plans forming in his mind. Whoever this was had a head start on him, but he would find them and show them why the Viper was not one to anger.

“No.” The succinct reply startled him somewhat. The man continued once he had the prince’s attention. “The area the men were found in is not the area the meeting was supposed to go down according to that document. It appears someone intercepted them.”

“So who was it and why did they take Sarella,” he muttered rhetorically. Was there more than one person trying to abduct his child? He had made many enemies over the years…

“SARELLA!” Ellaria’s elated cry broke him from his thoughts as he saw his paramour rushing to the far side of the park where he could now see a young man walking towards them, his daughter securely in his hold. Within seconds he was next to his lover, the two of them crowding around his child, whom the boy relinquished with no hesitancy.

“Mama! Papa,” his daughter cried happily, snuggling into Ellaria’s hold.

“Oh my baby,” Ellaria whispered, laying kisses all over their child before pulling back and checking her over. “How did this happen?”

Oberyn also took in the blossoming bruise on her cheek, he also saw the bandages around her tiny wrists that looked more like field dressings than a Maester’s work.
“The bad men killed Ms. Ayne and our guard. Ms. Ayne had told me to run so I did. But they caught me,” Sarella explained quickly, skipping details as any child her age would. “They bound my hands and one of them kicked me and hit me. They were going to take me to some man named Harper.”

Oberyn growled at the name. He’d been sellswords with the other man, only Oberyn had not liked him. He had no honor and was more of a murderer than a sellsword. He had heard the man had become a pirate and had perished in a brawl. Clearly he was wrong. Now he just had to find him and discover why he thought stealing one of his children was a good idea. He tuned back in to his child’s words.

“They then Jon saved me and he cleaned my wounds and got me food before we walked back here,” she finished happily. “He is very nice.”

Oberyn and Ellaria turned to the young man who had tried to slink away once he had handed over their child, only to be stopped by the guards. His cheeks turned a bit red at Sarella’s comment. It was a becoming look on the handsome young man, who strangely enough looked exceptionally northern. Oberyn was surprised to see such features in Essos. Of course he knew of the Company of Roses, but they tended to stay further east or north, and they definitely did not let one so young out of their sights. The boy could not be more than ten and two from his small stature.

“Thank you for saving my daughter… Jon was it,” Oberyn opened.

“Aye your highness,” the boy responded in a low gravelly voice with an accent that was most certainly northern. “As I told Lady Sarella there is no need for thanks; it was the right thing to do.”

Oberyn felt his brow rise. Did the boy recognize him or did Sarella tell him? “Indeed. Yet few actually follow through on the right thing. In any case, I owe you greatly for saving my daughter.”

“You really do not owe me anything your highness,” Jon murmured, clearly uncomfortable in this situation. “I cannot abide to allow a child to be hurt. I am just glad we were able to find you. I apologize for taking so long to bring her back here, but I felt getting her wounds cleaned would be best. I couldn’t find a Maester though, so I only had what supplies I could get from a local inn.”

Oberyn barely managed to keep from laughing incredulously. This boy was honestly apologizing for something so little, when he owed the boy the world for taking the time to save his child from brigands. This boy had put himself in danger doing so, yet it seemed he cared not for his own health but that of his daughter, as Oberyn could clearly see the boy had not tended to his own wounds just yet, little though they were. It seemed they had stumbled onto a diamond in the rough.

“It is perfectly acceptable,” Ellaria informed the boy kindly. “It is quite well done for one not trained in healing. I take it you have learned field dressing?”

“Aye milady,” Jon responded sheepishly. “I was lucky enough to learn from a trained warrior about such practices.”

“Oh? He must be quite proud to have you as a student,” she asked, clearly interested. “Perhaps we could tell him of your good work?”

“Unfortunately we parted ways a few weeks back. He was needed elsewhere and our paths no longer coincided.” Oberyn felt there was some truth to those words, but something about the way the boy spoke indicated there was far more to his parting from his teacher. He couldn’t help but feel his curiosity become peeked.

“Apologies Prince Oberyn,” the captain of the guard interrupted. “I need to speak to this young man
about the three men we found.”

From the corner of his eye he saw Jon tense, then steel himself for the consequences of his actions. He wanted to tell the boy he had nothing to worry about, but knew the Captain would not welcome it.

“I am at your disposal, sir,” Jon offered politely to the captain. He then turned to Oberyn and his family. “Your highness, my ladies.”

Oberyn watched as the boy moved off to the side, just out of hearing. He could tell from the body language the captain was interrogating the boy, a few of his men close at hand just in case. Jon never faltered and seemed to be answering every question without hesitation.

“Is he going to get in trouble father,” Sarella asked worriedly.

“I doubt it,” Nymeria responded, ruffling her sister’s hair. “He saved you and brought you back. Likely they will see this as defense and leave him be.”

“Or offer him a position in the guards, if his skill is truly as the captain stated,” Oberyn remarked absently.

“I can think of a few positions I could have him occupying,” his older daughter murmured salaciously, earning a snort from Ellaria and a long look from Oberyn.

Not that he refuted the statement, the boy was lovely, almost androgynous. Actually he reminded Oberyn a great deal of someone from his past. The memory was just within reach, but he couldn’t seem to grasp it. Then the boy smiled. It was small, barely there, but it was enough.

Rhaenys had that same smile, though never that small. It was a feature she shared with Rhaegar. But the brown curls with that smile brought his niece to mind far more than the brooding dragon prince. His mind whirled with the possibilities.

At the end of the war he’d been so incensed with what the usurper and Lannister had done to his family that he had cared little for the rest of Westeros. He had heard a rumor about the Usurper’s dog, Stark having a bastard, which amused him some considering the man’s honor. However, he had not cared too much to look into it further. Thinking back there were whispers that it was Ashara Dayne’s child with the wolf, but he knew that was not possible, the dates did not add up. Oh, Ashara had been pregnant, but she’d lost the babe early on from his recollection, not to mention the boy would have been older given the time frame from Harrenhall to the birth. The only Stark he’d heard of being so ‘free’ with his affections was the then heir Brandon. Eddard, the second son, was far too stiff to ruin his honor in such a way.

Yet it was Eddard that returned north with his sister’s bones and a baby, both retrieved from Dorne. His sister, Lady Lyanna had been held in the Tower of Joy, guarded by three kings…

It suddenly made sense. Why HAD three king’s guards been at the tower guarding a barely grown girl? Instead they should have been fighting on the field with their prince. Even if Rhaegar had wanted her guarded only one was really needed… unless, unless she carried his child. With Elia and her children safe in King’s Landing, or supposed to be, Lyanna would have been more vulnerable.

He had been infuriated when Rhaegar had crowned the wolf girl at the tourney, thinking he was spurning his actual wife. Elia had managed to calm him and told him about the identity of the Knight of the Laughing Tree and why Rhaegar had crowned her. She had also confided in him that she was glad Rhaegar had found another, as her health was failing and she was unsure if she would survive
the birth of her second child. Even if she did, both she and Rhaeger had agreed that she would be unable to bear another child, and with the dangers of childhood, even at the Red Keep, Rhaeger needed more children. However, the man had agreed that first and foremost any sons he had with Elia would be heir, and Elia would still be his queen. The prince had decided to use the Targaryens’ right of polygamy to choose another bride. While Oberyn hadn’t been happy about the information he had acquiesced to keeping his peace as Elia was more than fine with it.

Then Rhaeger had run off with the wolf girl, the king went well and truly mad killing the Lord of the north and his heir Brandon before calling for Eddard and Baratheon’s heads. Of course the North and the Stormlands called banners, and the Vale certainly wasn’t going to let them stand alone, nor would the Riverlands, especially after Eddard honored the betrothal that was once his brother’s. Elia and her children were trapped in the Red Keep, more hostage than family to the king. The next he knew Rhaeger, Elia and their children were dead, Baratheon was planting his arse on the throne, and those vicious Lannister mongrels were getting away with murder. It was no wonder he didn’t give a Northern Lord and his supposed bastard any more thought.

Now though, now he saw the truth. Eddard Stark had succeeded where he could not. He had hidden a dragon in wolf’s clothing right under the nose of that fat stag.

Part of Oberyn applauded Stark for his maneuvering and part of him hated the man for joining Baratheon in the first place. Though Eddard had been the only Lord on the rebellion side to demand Lannister and his men face justice for what they did to Elia and the children. Part of him also wanted to hate the boy for living where his niece and nephew had not, yet he could not find it in himself to do so. He would never blame a child for the parent’s wrongs, it was not the Dornish way.

Plus the boy had grown up a bastard, not an easy life for any outside the Free Cities and Dorne. Even in those places it was a hard existence. Oberyn had heard of Lady Stark’s legendary dislike of the boy, and he had heard rumors he had run away from home at least three years ago due to the harsh treatment. By the gods, that would make the boy four and ten at most if he left at one and ten. Was it the dragon blood that had him looking so delicate? Would Aegon have shared this build? Then again, Rhaeger had been taller at this age, and Northerner’s were burly people so why did the boy seem so delicate?

Wait… could he be?

No, the last documented case was near two centuries ago from what he read in the histories at the Citadel.

Sarella broke him from his contemplation.

“Are you in trouble Jon,” she asked, chewing her lip in worry.

“Nay milady,” the boy replied reassuringly joining their small group. “The Captain merely needed the facts of the event for his report. Such cases must always be documented for records and to help prevent future occurrences.”

“If you’re sure.” Sarella didn’t seem to quite buy his answer but Oberyn knew it was the truth. “Oh, this is my big sister Nymeria. She’s one of the Sand Snakes,” she introduced proudly.

“A pleasure milady,” Jon greeted his older daughter, kissing her hand politely.

“It most certainly could be,” she purred in response. The look his daughter sent him in return made the boy uncomfortable, his cheeks turning a bit red.
“Jon are you alright,” Sarella queried. “You’re not getting a fever are you? You’re all red.”

Jon coughed trying very hard to maintain his composure while Nym and Ellaria just grinned knowingly at his misfortune. Oberyn chuckled, well used to being in the same situation thanks to the ladies in his life.

“I am fine milady. I am glad you are back with your family,” he told her genuinely. “I am afraid this is where we must part…”

“Join us for dinner,” Ellaria announced cutting off the outburst Sarella was no doubt about to give. Oberyn had seen the way the girl’s eyes had watered a bit at the thought of the boy leaving. Honestly she was far too young to lose her heart to another man. Damned if her eyes didn’t light up at the idea his love had put forth.

“That is very thoughtful my lady but…” he trailed off as his eyes fell on Sarella, who had increased the size of her eyes exponentially. “It wouldn’t be prop…” She tilted her chin down, and it started to wobble. “I…” And there’s the lip pushing out. “I would love to join you if it is not an imposition,” he finished weakly, clearly defeated by the eight year old.

“Not at all,” Ellaria informed him slyly, a large grin painted on her face. Nym was practically shaking with laughter at the boy’s obvious inability to tell a child no.

Sarella cheered happily. “Now you can finish your story about how you became an honorary Dothraki,” she chirped pleasantly.

“Honorary Dothraki,” Oberyn repeated with a bit more respect in his voice. “Now this I must hear.”

And so the Dornish family led their new friend back to their villa for the evening.

XXX
“And that is how we became acquainted with your brother,” Oberyn finished the tale, having kept the part about his private revelations on Jon’s parentage to himself. The Stark children were all riveted by his words, as were the rest of the people in the hall.

Stark had thrown a feast to welcome them, mainly holding the family, household staff and guards, though Lord Cerwyn and Tallhart had joined them as their holds were close by. The hall had been full of noise until Stark’s younger children had asked Sarella to tell them how she had met their brother. It was subtle but the noise died down until everyone was able to hear. Many looked quite proud of the boy’s actions, especially the Master at Arms.

“If you had added some tears Jon probably would have given you a piggy back ride,” Arya informed Sarella knowingly.

“Arya,” Sansa cried out aghast. “You shouldn’t tell people how to manipulate Jon!” Some of the boys were nodding in agreement before the girl continued. “Besides, you know tears are saved for when you want extra sweets or to play with his hair.”

Oberyn and Ellaria laughed while the Stark parents just shook their heads in defeat.

“It is the way of siblings, yes,” he offered to Lord Eddard. “Always finding ways to get the others to do things for them.”

“True,” he agreed grudgingly. “Gods know Lyanna used that trick on Brandon and I several times. Never worked on father though.”

“I’m sure it did; he just likely didn’t make it obvious,” Oberyn countered. “It is hard for a father to tell his daughter no.”

“That it is,” Lord Tallhart agreed wryly. “I swear my children know it well, because I’ll tell my boy no one minute, the next Tahlia is coming up asking for the same thing and I cave nearly every time!”

“Praise the gods I only have boys,” Cerwyn japed eyes twinkling with good humor. “You’re a strong man handling, what… seven daughters now?”

Oberyn chuckled, tilting his head at the compliment. It had taken a bit of time to work out these stoic northerners, but he learned they were far more pleasant to deal with than most of the Lords between Dorne and the Neck. Their straightforward way of speaking was certainly refreshing. “Aye, and I wouldn’t change it for the world. Daughters keep you on your toes, more so than sons I think.”

“That is because we learn how to outmaneuver you men from an early age,” Ellaria quipped primly, a wicked smirk on her lips.

“Truer words have not been spoken,” Tallhart huffed in good humor. “Some days I swear my Dalliah is running my hold and I’m just for show! Gods know she’ll use my time away for some new project she’s been wanting to do and was waiting for my back to be turned.”

“Aye, but if it’s for the good of your family or people, its best to let your wife have her way,” Eddard added, his own eyes bright with laughter. “Less headaches.”

Oberyn watched as Lady Catelyn sent her husband a look, but didn’t refute his words. She really was such a southern lady, all poise and manners. He was so glad he never allowed Doran to marry
him off to one of the ladies of Westeros. He probably would have run away to Essos had he tried.

“I can’t believe Jon parted from Master Art and Master Oz,” Stark’s second son, well third if he wanted to keep up the ruse, muttered sadly. “He was learning so much from them.”

“I’m more worried that he no longer has them for protection,” Robb Stark growled, stabbing at the vegetables on his plate.

Oberyn managed to school his face to keep his surprise from showing. He had heard, mostly from some lords in the Riverlands, that the Stark Heir had played a big part in Jon leaving the North. His cruelty had helped drive the bastard from the only home he knew. The boy himself had never said, and would not speak disparagingly of any of his family, not even Lady Catelyn. Yet news had traveled, especially of Lord Stark’s very imaginative punishment for his heir. Really, making him live as a Snow until he proved himself worthy of his name again. It seemed to have done the boy good given his manner and actions since their arrival. He’d been unfailingly polite to his daughters and Ellaria as well as mature in his handling of the people around the Keep. There were not many young lords his age who acted with such maturity.

Lady Catelyn too did not act as he was expecting. From all he had heard in the past she disliked bastards, especially Jon, and worked to make his life miserable since her husband would not send him away. Now though she seemed more thoughtful of her actions and even, dare he say it, accepting of people regardless of their birth.

It appears Jon’s leaving had shaken the north up quite a bit. In fact many of the people they had passed north of the Neck had treated the group far better than many lords and ladies south of it. While not as free as Dorne, there was definitely a stronger belief in family in this area of the kingdom, regardless of status of birth, a belief Oberyn approved of.

“Do you doubt your brother’s ability to fight,” Obara challenged Robb. “While I was not there, he clearly held himself well when protecting Sarella.”

“No, it’s not Jon’s fighting ability that I doubt,” Robb argued quickly. “It’s just… He’s very… delicate compared to most northerners and well, he gets propositioned… A lot, and he never seems to quite get what these people actually want from him. At least with Master Art and Oz around most of them were deterred…”

“To be fair he is picking up on it more,” Sansa cut in gently. “Though according to his letters he has had a plethora of marriage proposals from both men and women.”

“We were worried he would be forced to marry a Dothraki Khal,” Bran piped in, the other children nodding in agreement.

“I can’t blame them,” Nymeria murmured, eyes clouded in memory. “He is quite… pleasant to look upon. And he blushes so prettily.”

“Now I really wish I had gotten to meet him,” Tyene grumbled with a pout.

“Jon is not marrying anyone any time soon,” Arya announced with finality. “And whoever he marries must have the Stark seal of approval.” Here she waved her hands at each of her siblings who were all nodding in agreement. “Which includes our direwolves!”

“Direwolves,” Obara asked curiously. “What makes a Direwolf different from any other wolf? And how did you come to have them”?

“Father found their mother beyond the Wall,” Bran explained excitedly. “And direwolves grow to be
as big as small horses. They are only a few months old but already they are the size of grown hounds. Father's wolf Storm is tall enough her head reaches just above his shoulder!’

Oberyn and his girls all looked surprised at that, as did Lords Cerwyn and Tallhart. Oberyn had read of direwolves, but no one had seen them in centuries. To see one in real life, verse from a book, which never had good enough drawings, would be remarkable.

“Would you like to see them later,” Arya offered to Sarella. “Mine’s named Nymeria, after the Dornish warrior queen, not your sister.”

“Well now I definitely want to meet her,” Nymeria stated playfully, while Sarella was agreeing wholeheartedly to see the wolf. “Anyone who shares my namesake must be worth meeting.”

As the children devolved into speaking of the creatures Oberyn turned to Stark. “I think you might be taking your sigil a bit too seriously Lord Stark.”

“Oh? And you can tell me you’ve never kept a viper before,” the man shot back dryly.

“Touché,” Oberyn acknowledged the hit. Really he was starting to enjoy Starks sharp wit and dry humor. “So what is beyond the Wall? I am actually hoping to see the great structure myself. According to the records in the citadel it is over seven hundred feet tall, yes?”

“It is indeed,” Stark replied thoughtfully. “Beyond… beyond is full of snow and ice. There is some vegetation as it is summer there, but not near what we have south of the wall. The people who live there do so mostly through hunting and fishing. There is little in the way of permanent structures, and there are indeed mammoths and giants still living there.”

“Truly?” He couldn’t keep the awe out of his voice. It was assumed that the giants and mammoths had all died out, living in nothing but myth now. “Are they as fearsome as the legends state?”

“Aye, in looks and I have no doubt in battle for they are very strong,” he stated thoughtfully, clearly remembering his experience. “Funnily enough they are actually quite gentle, and aside from fish they do not eat meat. I have a few pictures if you’d like to view them?”

“I would very much enjoy that Lord Stark,” Oberyn accepted the offer knowing full well they would also be discussing more about Jon.
chapter 30 Jon

Jon let out a breath as he continued to watch the sun set from the pier near the lower docks. Tomorrow morning he would be setting out for his destination. It had taken some doing, getting what he needed while Oberyn Martell had been in town. Since he had saved the prince’s daughter than man had taken an unusual interest in him.

After the first night sharing dinner with the man’s family, or part of it, the man had seemed to pop up randomly and invite Jon to join their excursions. Often he used Sarella against him as he couldn’t say no to the girl. She reminded him greatly of his own little sisters, well cousins. While he enjoyed their company, Sarella more than the others, he couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable for many reasons.

For all that his daughters were bastards and he was not married to Ellaria, you would never know it the way he treated them, regardless if they were in public or not. Jon had never experienced such open affection from his father, not unless it was in private and even then it was rare. His siblings, the younger ones at least, had all shown him affection but he knew it was only a matter of time before they would fall to society’s rules and keep their interactions more private.

He knew he could have had it a lot worse, but seeing the way this family acted brought out the little boy in him that had simply longed for his family to love and accept him. It also reminded him that he would never truly belong to his family, either side.

It had been pure luck when they were in Volon Therys that he had run into Aegon, or Young Griff as he called himself. He’d known the moment he’d seen the violet eyes in that slim, pointed face that this was his brother. He took after many of their ancestors, though his skin was darker. He was taller than Jon by half a foot, for all that he only had a year and some months on Jon. (Really, why was he so small? By all accounts Rhaeger was fairly tall and so were many of his Northern relatives. Worse, he took after his female ancestors more than not. Seven hells, Drogo still teased him about it in their letters!)

It was during one of the few times Art and Oz had let him traverse through the town on his own. Usually one of them went with him, but they had both been needed for some meeting or other with another sellsword group and so he’d had free time. He almost couldn’t believe his luck.

‘Young Griff’ was very nice and personable, and Jon could see why people would grow to love him. He definitely had that Targaryen essence that tended to draw people in droves. Jon felt slightly bad for deceiving the other boy, his… half-brother, as to who he really was. However, Jon couldn’t let this opportunity pass.

For the last few months he had been wracking his brain for plans on how to get Art and Oz to leave him and search for Aegon. He had made sure that the two in question didn’t catch on to his plans, though it had been difficult. However, in his gut he knew he needed to go to Valyria and he also knew the two knights would never allow it. Now though, they would have the actual heir to the throne to look after, not the bastard by-product. He just had to play his cards right and plan accordingly.

He had considered asking his ancestors for help during his dream sessions, but some of their statements and more pointed questioning had him clamming up. No it was best not to involve them, they were already doing enough trying to prepare him for his battle with the Others. Instead he ran through possible scenarios, until he ran into Aegon and a more solid plan had formed.

Aegon really was everything a prince and future king should be, far more than Jon in any case. He
was well spoken, personable and fluent in several languages. He was also decent with a sword, though Jon did have him beat in most of their spars. Jon had come to genuinely like his older half-brother, something he had not felt since he and Robb were very young. What’s more, Aegon seemed to genuinely like him in return always ruffling his hair and giving him one-armed hugs. He also shared many things with Jon that he didn’t seem to share with anyone else. So he learned all he could, about Aegon and his ‘father’ and sailing on the Shy Maiden.

One time he thought the jig might be up when Septa Lenore came to gather Aegon after one of their spars. She had given Jon the most peculiar look, which made him wonder if she just knew his low status and did not approve, as many septas acted around bastards. Thankfully it seemed she had kept her thoughts to herself as Aegon had joined him again the next day.

Part of him wondered if they would have had such a good relationship if they’d grown up together in the Red Keep. Likely not. He already knew how most people in Westeros treated bastards, and no doubt having him in the Keep with his mother and sister would not have endeared Jon to him. It was the memory of the same mother and sister that kept him silent about his true identity. No doubt the other would hate him for living when his mother and sister had been killed.

He was doubly lucky Prince Oberyn hadn’t found out. The Dornish prince was known for having loved his sister greatly and he still called for the heads of her murderers. What would he think if he knew he had the child of the woman his sister’s husband had left her for in his home? Sure, Art and Oz had said Elia had known and even approved of the marriage, but did she? How often did men assume women were content or approving when in reality they had no other choice but to accept?

Regardless he had put his plan into action when he found out that the Shy Maid was set to leave, heading down to Myr for some trade. Personally he thought Aegon’s ‘father’ was being a bit brazen going so close to Westeros, but he had kept the boy hidden all these years. If no one looked past the blue hair it wasn’t hard to keep hiding as the son of a ship captain.

It had taken some doing, and he definitely knew that if Art and Oz ever bothered to find him again he would be in for a world of trouble. Thankfully the potion he gave them would do them no harm, he had triple checked. Instead they would wake up, two to three days later with a massive hangover. The crate he had put them in was large and had enough air holes to support them until they woke up and could be ‘discovered’. He truly hated going this route, but he feared if he had them ‘accidently’ run into Aegon they might not realize it, or they’d drag him along. With what he needed to do he couldn’t allow that. (And if it also kept him from witnessing the two men he’d come to respect choosing someone else over him like everyone always did, then that was his business.) Besides, Aegon didn’t need a bastard dragging him down. This way he’d get two of the best Kingsguards to help him retake the Iron Throne, and Jon would be able to go to Valyria unhindered.

Well, mostly. The merchants in Volantis were quite the pain when it came to obtaining a ship and supplies enough to reach his destination. He had learned to obscure the truth when haggling from his lessons with his ghostly relatives. For as kind and sweet as she was, Rhaenys was a cutthroat in negotiations.

He supposed he could have asked Prince Oberyn for help, as the man seemed eager to repay him for helping Sarella, but Jon just couldn’t do that. One, he had only done the right thing and the man truly owed him nothing for it. Two, he felt particularly guilty about not notifying the Prince face to face that his nephew was alive and well. Instead he had carefully drawn a picture of his half-brother, discreetly putting some information in the background and slipped it into the packet of letters the prince had kindly agreed to send north for him. Bran and Arya would make sure it got back to the prince, or at least their father would, if he knew about his letters.
Maybe he should send an anonymous letter to the prince? Or leave one here with Nymeria’s mother? Maybe not, she had been just as… aggressive as her daughter in her flirting with Jon. Why did women find it so amusing to turn him red? And why could he not control that reaction as well as he could his other thoughts? It was quite vexing!

He had foolishly asked Drogo in his last letter to the Khal how he could work on that. Instead of offering advise the other man had teased him, and demanded he send a missive immediately after he lost his ‘maiden head’ as there was a very substantial bet going on within the Khalasar. His reply consisted of a lot of very inappropriate words, so he hoped Daenerys didn’t read it. She had been kind enough to thank him for the Westrosi to Dothraki translations he’d given Drogo for his new bride, in one of their letters. Jon was pleased he could be of help to his aunt, even if he hadn’t known it was going to be her.

That seemed to be his purpose in life. Help those members of his family that he could, but never interfere with their lives more than necessary. If he managed to complete this ‘quest’ he’d somehow earned he would be saving both sides. If he survived the Doom of Valyria. During the entire time here he heard whispers from sailors about those islands and the strange smoke still hanging over them. There was talk of poisonous gases, magical curses and one very far-fetched theory that the gods had claimed the place as some sort of foothold into the mortal world. Jon held the first two as more plausible than the last one.

Either way he was heading into a dangerous land that no one had reportedly returned from since the Doom occurred. Ever.

On that positive thought he decided to head back to the small inn he had stayed at during his time here. Despite their numerous offers, Jon had refused to let Oberyn or any of his family pay for his accommodations or to put him up. It would have been far more than he could accept.

Nodding to the barkeep as he slipped towards the back, he sincerely hoped he could manage some sleep tonight.
So much for hope. Jon bit back a sigh as he found himself in the dreamscape world once more. Only this time he looked to be in the Gods Wood of Winterfell. A sense of longing swept through him. It had been years since he’d seen any part of Winterfell, not even his dreams had brought him back here before. Slowly his steps brought him to the Heart Tree, though something was different about it. The tree wasn’t frowning… it was… smiling?

Just as he reached out to touch it something clamped down on his lower leg. Blinking in surprise he glanced down to see a large white fur ball attacking his boot. Jon wasn’t sure how to react as the pup hopped back, tail wagging and bright red eyes staring at him.

“Hello,” he tried, kneeling down to the pup’s level. If he wasn’t mistaken this was a wolf pup, but he’d never seen one so large. “Who might you be?”

The pup said nothing, instead choosing to bump into Jon’s chest, knocking him back a little ways allowing the pup to clamber all over him, licking at his face.

“Whoa now,” Jon laughed, trying to keep the pup from slobbering all over him. Soon the pup calmed, giving Jon the chance to pull it into his lap, scratching behind his ears. The pup nearly flopped into his hold, pleased with the attention. Strangely though it had yet to make a sound.

“You’re a quiet one aren’t you? Almost like a ghost.” The pup’s head and ears popped up. “Is that your name? Ghost?” This earned him a lick in the face once more. “I’ll take that as a yes. Now where did you come from and why are you in my dream?”

“He’s your Direwolf,” a familiar voice informed him. Jon turned to find Lord Rickard sitting on one of the roots of the Heart Tree, much like his father did when he was in the Gods Wood. “This is the first time he’s been strong enough to try and bond with you in your dreams.”

“Lor…” He stopped short at the look the other man sent him. “Uh… grandfather,” he greeted shakily.

Rickard nodded before motioning the boy to join him. “This pup is one of the litter born to the Direwolf Ned found beyond the Wall,” he explained as the boy took a place on the root opposite him, still cradling the small wolf. “Each of your cousins have one, as these animals have bonds with the Stark family. This one is yours.”

“But I’m not a Stark,” Jon whispered softly, though his arms tightened a bit around the pup. “I’m just a Snow…”

“You carry the blood of the Starks, which is no small thing,” Rickard corrected. “You are also a trueborn Targaryen for all that you can’t seem to accept that. Even if you weren’t trueborn, you are not JUST anything.” His sharp look silenced any protests Jon could have thrown out before he had a chance to even utter them. “It’s true that bastards have a bad reputation, even North of the Neck. A few bad apples have ruined it for the rest. Doesn’t help that those in charge love to perpetuate the theory to help keep themselves ‘above’ everyone else. There are also those foolish enough to believe such tripe simply because some Septon told them it was a sin.” Here he scoffed in disgust. “Before the North was conquered by the dragons, bastards were not looked down upon as much. Life is too hard and death too familiar for our people to worry about who brought a child into the world. Instead what mattered was family and the actions of a man or woman. In fact the Stark family has had many bastard branches throughout our history. Most of them have been good loyal people.”
“But even then they could not inherit unless there were no trueborn children,” Jon murmured quietly, eyes flashing with despair. “And the only way to prove themselves useful is as a soldier or a whore…”

Thwack

Jon flinched when a sharp sting centered on his forehead. He felt it gingerly, then looked down to find the small pebble his grandfather had used to hit him with. The flat look on his grandfather’s face kept his tongue silent.

“These are Greyjoy’s words you’re spouting,” Rickard scolded. “You can’t possibly believe such shite. You certainly cannot believe little Sarella would grow up to such a profession.”

Jon turned his head away, cheeks flushed a bit in anger. He didn’t know why but he just couldn’t seem to get his ire under control right now. “Only because her family cares too much to allow that, and Dorne is different, more accepting. I was grateful fath… uncle took me in and raised me when he didn’t have too. I knew I was lucky, for I could have had it worse. I thought I could prove I at least belonged in the north, that I could show them I was a good man despite my birth. But Lady Stark and Lord Robb proved me wrong,” he grit out, years of pain and frustration echoing in his tone. “Instead I became the ‘typical’ bastard showing my dishonor for the world. The only ones who believed in me were my siblings and a few of the adults. But they could do nothing as Lord Stark turned a blind eye. And why shouldn’t he? He had damaged his honor to allow me to stay in his home, taking the fury of his wife, what little she did not turn on me,” Jon nearly spat. “So I did what they wanted and left. And for the first time I felt hope. Hope that I could be more than what others expect simply because of my title of bastard. The whole world seemed open to me, full of endless possibilities. But I was wrong. I know my purpose now, why I was created. I am to be the shield that protects the realm from the Others. I am to fight the Night King and give my life so that the trueborn members of my family do not have to. Because I don’t belong anywhere, like every other bastard in this world.”

“You are not a bastard,” Rickard reminded him.

“I’m as good as,” Jon snapped. “No one will accept my mo… Lady Lyanna’s marriage to Prince Rhaeger. The Seven will consider it blasphemous, and disregard it completely not only because he was already married but because they refuse to believe any ceremony in front of the Old Gods is legitimate. The North will not accept it or me because they hate the dragons, not only for this last war and what Aerys did to you and Lord Brandon, but for making the north bend knee in the first place.” He turned from the man and let his eyes stare out over the pond, one hand gripped tightly in Ghost’s fur to try and hide the trembling. “With Robb as the future Lord I most definitely will not be welcome. If Aegon manages to take the throne he certainly wouldn’t want me around; the reason that started the bloody war which resulted in his mother and sister dying. Oh, they might accept me for a time, to battle their enemies, act as their shield. But once the dust settles and the war over should I somehow survive I do not think it will be to welcoming arms.”

“Aegon liked you well enough,” Rickard offered.

“Only because he did not know the truth,” Jon argued. “If he knew he’d probably have run me through. Once they learn what it really means to be a bastard the trueborns push you away as far away as possible. Those that don’t will only hold off the demands of society for so long before they too realize you are worth nothing and push you away.” He couldn’t seem to stop talking, and he was shaking more. Were his cheeks wet? “No matter how hard you try to be good, how hard you work to show them you are not evil it will be for not. They will just turn their back on you because you are not worth anything except fighting in an impossible war against an impossible foe. You are not
worthy of the love of a family, you are not worthy of respect, you are not worthy to live…”

Two strong arms wrapped around him, pulling him into a strong chest and Jon broke. Tears fell faster as sobs escaped him. Ghost had jumped from his lap allowing Rickard to sweep the boy up into his hold. No one had ever held him like this for as long as he could remember, not even his father. Sure his siblings had hugged him, but it was still rare and Jon didn’t quite know how to accept it. Even when Sarella gave him the occasional hug he had tensed up.

“Oh pup,” Rickard sighed sadly. “You couldn’t be more wrong. You are worth so much more than any of us can ever quantify. You are the best of both our houses. Your kindness and humility has already brought great changes to this world. Lives are being saved and changed because of you and the choices you have made.”

He knew the boy had carried a lot of hurt in his heart, but he had not expected it to be this bad. Their ancestors had not quite realized it, but they had noted something seemed off about the boy lately and demanded Rickard fix it. It had not been a task he looked forward too. He’d never been an overly affectionate man; that had been his wife’s job. Still he had tried to show all of his children he loved them in his own way. Ned had followed his example, far more reserved than his other siblings. Only, his trueborn children had the benefit of a mother who took over such shows where Ned could not. Jon had never had that. He’d been robbed of his mother, and no one had shown him the type of love and care all children need. It didn’t help that his own blood and Ned’s wife had hurt the boy repeatedly. Now he was in a land far from the only home he’d ever known, finding out truths and learning of a weighty destiny with no one he could truly explain himself too. No doubt the boy felt he needed to prove to his ancestors he could shoulder this burden, but even the strongest man needed a support pillar or they would break.

Arthur Dayne and Oswell Whent had done a good job guarding the boy, mentoring him, but even they had not understood how far the damage to his spirit went. Jon had learned to never fully trust another person, not even adults. He truly felt he needed to rely on himself and that he couldn’t burden others with his problems and challenges. Likely he also felt they would never believe him if he spoke of the dreams and his abilities, though Rickard knew the two Kingsguard would be more open than others.

“He’s right Jon.” Another familiar voice that was not from one of the dead last he checked had Jon nearly snapping his neck to look at the speaker.

His Uncle Benjen stood a few feet away, a large brown Direwolf next to him. He was wearing his ranger clothing, though no weapons. He opened his arms wide and after a small push from his grandfather Jon rushed into them, relishing the familiar smell of his uncle.

“Look at you. So big now,” Benjen commented jovially, holding Jon’s shoulders as he got a good look. “Practically a man grown. The again, from your letters you’ve done more than most men twice your age.”

“You… you’ve read my letters,” Jon asked in surprise. He’d not truly been sure they had been received, though he had hoped. That his uncle had read them too… Had all of the family read them? “Wait… how are you in my dream? You’re not…” His grey eyes grew large with alarm.

Benjen chuckled ruffling his hair. “Nay, I’m back at Castle Black in my room far as I know. Since bonding with this one.” He motioned to his wolf that was playing with Ghost. “I’ve been having more… adventures in my sleep. I’ve been told it’s normal for wargs, though not too sure this is what they meant.”

“Wargs,” Jon parroted back in confusion.
“Aye, according to the Free Folk, some of us northerners have the ability to send our minds into animals,” he explained jovially. “Bit strange at first, nearly gave the lads back at the Wall heart attacks when I first tried it. Thought I’d gone and had a fit.”

“That is because you foolishly did not inform them of you intentions,” another reprimanded lightly. It was not a voice Jon knew.

Turning he found a much older man standing by the Heart Tree staring at the white bark and blood red leaves as if he’d never seen them before. He looked positively ancient, like Old Nan. Before he could ask who this was the man looked his way, his clear violet eyes crinkling with emotion as he took in Jon.

“You must be young Jaehaerys, or Jon I believe is what you go by,” the man greeted, smiling widely. His eyes seemed to study Jon intently, like he was seeing something he never thought he’d see again.

“Yes sir,” Jon stuttered out bowing a bit to the elder. “Jon Snow, well… Jaehaerys Targaryen… Um… call me Jon?”

The old man chuckled lightly as he came forward, pulling Jon up by his shoulders. “No need to bow to me. I am Maester Aemon Targaryen, your many times great uncle, and I am very pleased to meet you.”

“The same Maester Aemon at Castle Black,” Jon asked, vaguely remembering uncle Benjen mentioning the man before. He honestly thought the man had died by now. Uncle Benjen had said he was older than Old Nan, and she was old.

“Aye, I try to keep the lads there as healthy as I can, including Benjen here, for all the good it does,” he teased gently, eyes shining with humor.

“For the last time it was an accident,” Benjen huffed petulantly, arms crossed as he took a seat next to his father by the Heart Tree.

“Of course,” Aemon drawled, eyebrow hiked up derisively. “Thorne just happened to fall into your closed fist, with enough force to break his nose. Complete accident.”

“He’s very clumsy,” Benjen added, only to earn a smack upside the head from his father, though it clearly had no force to it.

Jon tried hard to bite back a laugh but really couldn’t when Aemon rolled his eyes.

“Now, not that I mind being here, as I have not been able to see so clearly in decades, but why were we brought to this place,” Aemon queried calmly, not one to jump to conclusions. “While I am very happy to meet another living member of my family, I had not thought it would be in dreams…”

“I believe the gods decided Jon needed to hear from some of his living relatives instead of just the dead ones,” Rickard informed them. “At least those who know who he is. He’s had a lot put on his shoulders, and I think we can all agree sometimes you just need family.”

“What living family members don’t know about him,” Benjen asked, forgetting about the dragon siblings in the east.

“I believe Lord Rickard is referring to young Daenerys and Viserys,” Aemon reminded the young Stark.
“And Aegon,” Jon muttered a bit, flushing at the looks he received. “Um… Someone was able to smuggle my half-brother out of King’s Landing before the sack. I met him, but… I didn’t let him know who I was…”

“Young Aegon is alive,” Aemon gasped with shocked joy. To know more than a few dragons were left in the world helped lift his aged heart.

“When and where did you meet him,” Benjen pushed, curious as to what his nephew was up to. For once he didn’t have to wait for letters from Ned, he could actually get it from the source. “Did you tell Ser Dayne and Ser Whent?”

Jon flinched a bit when his uncle mentioned those names, something none of the men missed. “Um…”

Benjen straightened, taking on his persona of First Ranger. “Report.”

Unable to disobey that tone of voice Jon explained how he and his two mentors had made it to Volon Therys and how he had run into Aegon, literally. The men all shared amused looks when he told them how friendly Aegon had been towards him, though he didn’t know why. He hesitated when he got to the point where he drugged Art and Oz to send them to Aegon unknowingly, but a look from his grandfather had him spilling that as well. He trailed off at the point where he had reached Volantis, cringing as he took in Uncle Benjen’s un-amused appearance.

“What in seven hells convinced you to purposely get rid of your protectors,” Benjen stated softly, but the tone reminded Jon of the few times his father had been exceptionally angry and was barely holding his temper. “You are a boy of four and ten, in a completely foreign land and you just ‘shipped’ away your best shields. How could you be so foolish?”

Jon gulped but held fast. He knew he had made the right choice. He couldn’t ask either man to risk their lives for the quest he was given. He was the one that had to go to Valyria, not them.

Benjen looked ready to continue but Aemon held his hand up silencing the younger Stark. He moved so that he could look Jon in the eye.

“Jon,” he started gently. “From what I have learned about you from Lord Stark and Benjen, you are not a reckless person. Indeed, from the letter Lord Stark has shown us, you seem to put the safety of others, your family and the north especially, above yourself. Lord Rickard mentioned you had a lot on your shoulders, so I am assuming there is something you feel you need to do, and you believe that if Dayne and Whent stayed they would be in danger.”

Jon felt a lump growing in his throat, surprised by how well Maester Aemon read him. Though he couldn’t speak he did nod his head in confirmation.

“Does this… mission have to do with the threat you’ve warned Lord Stark about?” Jon’s eyes widened in disbelief. He had hoped and prayed his father would believe his letter but he did not think he would tell others. “Yes, Lord Stark told the Watch and indeed several of his other lords about this threat. It has been confirmed with the Wild… uh Free Folk. We too are working on protecting the realm from this threat.”

“He believed me,” Jon whispered, a warm feeling spreading through his heart. The biggest worry he had was his father would not believe, even if he got the letter. So often he had been painted a liar back in Winterfell because of Theon and Robb’s actions that it was very possible his word would be instantly discredited.
“Of course he did Jon,” Benjen confirmed, much calmer now. “He knows what caused you to leave, everyone does. There have been many changes in Winterfell and the north. Robb and Theon were punished for their actions, though truthfully the bloody squid got off light. At least Robb has come to realize the hurt he has caused, even Catelyn has opened her eyes. All of us know you would never lie about something like this, not when it means the safety and lives of the people. Ned is working to prepare the north for this threat, we have even worked out a peace with the Free Folk and the giants.”

“We are also gathering as much dragon glass as possible and making sure what Valyrian steel we have is on hand,” Aemon added. “Both of these are good weapons against this foe. However, since I understand that you have… special dreams, perhaps something is telling you of another weapon?”

“I… I don’t know, I just feel like I have to go there,” Jon tried to explain. “It’s like a pull in my gut. Every time I look at a map or get closer, the pull gets stronger.”

“And what place is that?” Benjen frowned trying to think of just where his nephew needed to go. Really the boy was in Volantis, in Essos. Surely there was nothing of value against this enemy in either of those places. The unsure, pained look his nephew gave him did nothing to make him feel better.

“Valyria.” It was Aemon who answered the question and Jon’s refusal to meet his eyes told Benjen the old man had guessed right.

“Absolutely not,” he stated with finality. “Valyria is a death trap! I will not have my nephew going to such a place. I don’t care what your gut tells you.”

“I have to,” Jon snapped, his eyes blazing with a determination Benjen had not seen before. “It’s not just the pull telling me to go. Just as Grandfather is here, other ancestors have visited my dreams. Including Daeneys the Dreamer.” Aemon gasped in shock while Benjen stared flummoxed. “There is something there that can help stop the Long Night and I have to find it. If I told anyone they would not let me go; they would try to take this upon themselves. But they won’t be able to,” Jon fumbled trying to explain. He’d never been good at articulating his thoughts when he was calm, doing so when upset was even harder. “I just… I have to!”

“That may very well be, Jon,” Aemon acknowledged gently, ignoring Benjen’s stuttering. “But you do not have to do it alone. I am sure you could have convinced your guards of your need and they would have gone with you. It is the duty of the Kingsguard to protect the king’s family. Dayne and Whent made oaths to the Targaryens, which includes you.”

When Jon looked away in shame seeming to not believe him Aemon paused. Something told the forgotten prince that his young relative didn’t believe in his value to their family, simply for being a member. Part of him cursed Lord Stark for that, hiding the boy as a bastard, which comes with its own stigmas. Really the blame laid with Lady Stark and her older children’s treatment of the boy. One can only live for so long hearing and experiencing one type of treatment before it becomes ingrained. While Jon clearly had a good heart and forgave his tormentors to an extent (though he was sure the dragon in the boy was merely sleeping and would one day rise against said tormentors) he would never forget what was done and said. Such things are hard to overcome in adults, let alone a child of four and ten. The way history painted most baseborns also did not help.

“Jon,” Aemon spoke with authority he only used when trying to put unruly rangers in their place. The boy’s eyes immediately met his. “Whether base born or true, you carry the blood of Targaryens and Starks. Neither bloodline is something to scoff at. While true both have had bad apples, birth status regardless, both families always take care of their own. The only time either have ever risen against their blood is when the threat endangered the whole family or the kingdom. I understand that
you may not feel worthy of either house, the way you were treated by those who should have cared
for you or at the very least respected your rights as a human would make it difficult for you to see
your worth. I do not know much about you, but I can tell you carry the best traits of both houses.
You should also not let others define who and what you are,” he advised sternly. “I am a Maester,
and a Black Brother, who used to be a prince, one of the highest members of society. However, in
my heart I knew I was needed on the Wall, so I did not let anyone tell me I couldn’t be a member of
the Black Watch, or even a simple Maester. People put so much emphasis on names because so
many cannot be defined without them. Take that name away and they are nothing. But you my boy,
you have the strength to not need a name, for you will forge your own path and make whichever
name you choose, Targaryen, Stark, Snow or some made up concoction; a great name to be known
throughout the world and history. No matter what though, you are our family, and we will support
you and love you.”

For the first time in a long time Jon truly believed those words. Here was a man who had given up
his titles and name to be something other, something more. It was possible in this world to make your
own mark. It would not be easy, it would take time, but he could do it. However, even greater was
the knowledge his family did care about him, and would still care about him through it all.

Unable to control himself Jon threw himself at Aemon, wrapping his arms around the older man
tightly, barely registering the other’s startled gasp. He did however note the equally strong embrace
he received in return.

“Stay strong little one,” Aemon whispered into his hair. “And make sure you come home safe. I
would very much like to meet you in person.”

“I know I’m not exactly the best person to say this,” Benjen huffed as he joined the two, one hand
ruffling through Jon’s curls. “But try not to do anything reckless? I too want to see you back home in
the north. You will always be welcome, no matter what.”

Jon pulled back slightly managing to pull himself together somewhat, though a few tears still leaked
from his eyes. He nodded his agreement to his two uncles.

“Remember little one, winter is coming,” Aemon stated wryly.

“With fire and blood,” Benjen added with a boyish grin.

“I’ll remember,” Jon told them stoically. “I promise.”
Jon sighed as he tied down the sail on his small boat. He’d be landing on the main island of Valyria soon and didn’t want to lose control of the ship. Those lessons from the Belladonna had come in quite handy for this portion of his journey. Though he was not on the open sea, traversing the bay between Valyria and Volantis was far more treacherous that most let on. Probably because of the time of year and the storms that liked to crop up suddenly in this area. It also didn’t help that visibility became murky the closer one came to the ancient islands. A fog seemed to hang over the entire place, drifting out to trick unsuspecting sailors to crashing on rocks.

The past few days had been very tiring for Jon, as he couldn’t afford to sleep much if at all or risk finding himself without a ship and on the water. This meant that he hadn’t visited his dreams recently, which saddened him.

After his talk with his grandfather, uncle and great uncle he’d had more dreams where Ghost had appeared. The young direwolf was a bright spot in his days, or nights as the case may be. He took time each dream to train with the small wolf and simply enjoy his company. Even though they had yet to meet in person the small wolf was already loyal to Jon.

In fact, one of his new favorite memories was when his ancestor Theon Stark, who was surprisingly similar to the Greyjoy ward bearing the same name, tried to get overly hard on him. Ghost had not appreciated the other man’s tone and had proceeded to show his dislike by urinating on the man’s leg. Theon hadn’t noticed until Aegon and Brandon had lost it and nearly collapsed in laughter. The others watching that night were a bit more discrete in their humor, though not by much.

When Theon looked to Jon to punish Ghost, who sat oh-so-prettily beside him, Jon just shrugged and reminded his ancestor that Ghost was a wild animal. While Theon was not amused in the least, the others experienced a new round of amusement.

Another night he got to see the softer side of Visenya, as she doted on Ghost, cuddling him and whispering sweet words when she thought no one was watching. Jon thought the like for his familiar might have started when Ghost chose to go to Visenya instead of Rhaenys like most would believe the natural choice. Aegon and Rhaenys simply grinned, knowing their sister-wife well, especially her love of fluffy animals.

Still, he missed those times he got to learn from his family and see Ghost in his dreams. Now that he had more confidence in his place among them, as well as realizing he had a purpose in this life, no matter what anyone said, he could let himself relax around his ancestors. Well, he relaxed as much as his lessons allowed. Never let it be said that either the Starks or Targaryens pulled their punches when it came to training. They had promised to make him a top-notch warrior and by the gods they planned to follow through!

The ship tilted starboard just as a wave passed, breaking him from his thoughts. Shaking his head he forced himself to focus. He was close now and couldn’t afford to be distracted. Until he was on the island he would not be safe, and even then he faced grave danger.

No one had gone to Valyria and returned since the Doom. At least no one anyone heard of. According to some tales he heard whispered by fearful sailors in the taverns, some men had gotten too close by ship and all of them went mad. Others said all those who did make it to shore and back ended up killing themselves in some crazed fashion. Either way, the stories did nothing to instill confidence in Jon about coming to this place. However, his path was set and he planned to see it through. He just really hoped the letter he left with that strange soothsayer would not need to be sent.
to his siblings.

‘Flashback:

Jon had been making his way to the docks where the small ship he’d bartered for waited for him to start his journey. The man he’d bought it from hadn’t believed his ruse that he needed the boat for trading purposes, but hadn’t cared all that much either once the coin was in hand.

He took some of the back allies, not wanting to be seen by many when he left. Some of the town guard stopped him to speak every now and then, working to get him to join, or just keep an eye on him as a favor to Nymeria’s mother, who was well known there. To keep word of his true destination quiet he knew he’d have to slip away quietly.

He was about a street away from the dock his little schooner was tied too when a hand reached out from a small doorway, grabbing him by his tunic and hauling him inside. Jon immediately reached for his sword, ready to defend himself only to come up short when he found himself staring into the milky eyes of an old woman. How this tiny frail grandmother had managed the strength to accost him he couldn’t even begin to fathom.

“You are about to embark on a very dangerous journey young prince,” the woman rasped, her voice like thin paper crinkling in the wind.

“How…”

“I have seen it,” she declared, one knobby finger waving in his face. “Magic my boy is coming back into the world. Already my dreams have become stronger, as have yours.” Jon opened his mouth to speak but couldn’t find any words. “Other magic has also grown stronger and you must beware of those that declare themselves for the Red God. They will look to control you to bring about their world order, once they learn you to be the Prince that was Promised!”

“But I’m not…”

“You are,” she rebuked sharply. Then her hands cradled his face gently; her skin was rough and worn. “But you cannot let anyone tell you how to live or what to believe. Only by following your heart can you truly find the answer to protecting the realm of men. You must start in the forbidden isle, at the tallest peak. There will you find the beginning. Only by knowing the beginning can you truly prevent the end.”

Jon blinked, unsure of what the woman spoke of, yet not really wanting to argue with her either. Something in his gut told him her words were important, even if he couldn’t suss them out now.

She pulled a small bag from her robes placing it firmly in his hands. “Eat one a day, until you return. It will keep you’re strength.” Then she reached into his tunic and pulled out the letter he had penned to his siblings. He had been planning to ask the harbormaster to send it if he had not returned within two moons. “I will hold onto this for you. Should you not return within a reasonable time.”

Once again Jon had no idea what to say.

“Now off you go young prince,” she urged him, pushing him from her home. “Keep your own counsel, do not believe everything you see or hear, only what your heart knows to be true.”

With that last bit of wisdom the door closed in his face leaving Jon staring at the wood in confusion.

End Flashback’
Jon had turned her words in his head over and over in the early days of his trip, but finally just shrugged it off. Though he’d been wary about it he had followed her instructions and eaten the strange pieces of dried fruit dipped in some sort of herbs each day. The first time had been difficult, but he’d sucked it up like a Stark and just done it. His gut had told him it would be important, as did Daeneys when he entered the dream world the first night on the sea. He was not about to dismiss anything she said.

Surprisingly he found he did have more strength and energy after eating the strange concoction. Even with little sleep over the last days he was still performing as if he had slept eight hours. Eying the craggy shoreline and ominous landscape of the island before him he dearly hoped this gift would continue to do the job.

There was a good chunk of beach he could see, most of it black sand, likely from volcanic activity centuries ago, or so he remembered from a lesson long past with Maester Luwin. Rocks, pushing up from the ground in a broken fashion, almost mimicking dragon teeth, broke this up. These rocky formations continued away from the shore into the tree line and no doubt to the mountains he could see, just vaguely, in the distance. The woods looked far darker than even the Wolfswood on a dreary day. The greens were not the vibrant thriving green of living plants. Instead they were drab and sickly, as if the forest stood on its last leg and barely held on to any life. Worse he could see no traces of wildlife, yet there was a presence coming from the woods that seemed alive. It was not a pleasant feeling.

Truly he had no idea what to expect once he started towards his ‘destination’. Daeneys said he’d just know how to get there. Torrhen told him to follow the ridgeline till he found the highest point. Aegon told him to always keep the position of the sun and head northwest. Others had put in their two stags as well, but Jon couldn’t say anyone really had any solid advice given no one really knew what to expect there. It didn’t help that what few surviving maps of the area did exist, were under lock and key of the nobles of Volantis, so he was walking in completely blind. A very unsettling experience if he was honest.

He had some luck on his side as the waves gently helped his guide is small ship onto the sandy beach. He remembered stories he’d heard from Zee and a few others about how small vessels could easily be tossed by an errant wave. It took some time but he managed to pull it up as far as possible, tying it off to a nearby boulder in hopes it would still be there upon his return. If not he would have to find some other way off this rock.

Checking the time of day he decided it would be best for him to camp for the night and get started in the morning, once he’s had a good rest. Quickly he works to set up a camp, with a small fire and basic traps around his parameter to warn of any approaching danger. His Stark ancestors and lessons from the hunters back in Winterfell had definitely helped there. Once he had a good defensible position, with a solid boulder to his back and clear line of sight to the front he settled in for the night. Tomorrow would be the first of very long days trying to find his way through this mess.

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When he woke in the dream world he found himself back in the Gods Wood at Winterfell. It was empty save for Ghost who was chewing on a rather large stick, or more accurately a tree branch. Shrugging when no one appeared after several minutes, Jon joined is Direwolf, tugging at the wood to play with the pup. Ghost’s eyes lit up at the challenge and he dug his paws into the ground to give him leverage. They wagged war over the miniature tree for several minutes, until the wolf decided it wanted to wrestle instead, jumping on Jon and throwing the boy off kilter. Together they rolled around, laughter and barks echoing through the Gods Wood, until both were well and tired.
Jon plopped into the place between the Heart Tree’s roots, Ghost draped over his lap like a living blanket. The boy ran a hand through the thick white fur as the wolf dozed, grey eyes resting on the tranquil pool he remembered from his youth. No words were spoken, for they didn’t seem needed between the two. Instead both enjoyed simply existing.
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When Jon woke the following morning he was far more rested than he had felt in weeks. He completed his morning rituals and cleaned up the camp, making sure to keep his presence as unobtrusive as possible. Checking the traps he noted smaller animals had disturbed a few, but nothing that could have given him pause to worry.

Packing his sack he gathered everything he could and prepared to head out. He knew he would have to risk the water on the island once he got further in, which he would have to boil if he remember Maester Luwin’s and Ser Art’s lessons. Since no one was sure what had caused the Doom, it was likely most sources of food and water would be fouled in some way. Hopefully by taking this extra precaution he could avoid stomach pains or worse, death.

He decided to scout the edges of the beach hopeful there might be a river to follow inland. Best to keep close to a source of water that would grow fresher the further in he went.

Soon minutes turned to hours and hours turned to days, though truthfully he could not give a fair account of how many had passed. The strange fog seemed to block out light and dark of the changing sky, making it difficult to tell how much time had passed. Instead he judged more by when he woke to when he slept. Thankfully the river he had found did cut deep into the island, though the terrain had gotten more treacherous the further in he got. From what he could judge though he appeared to be headed in the right direction. Even with the fog he could see one peak that seemed taller than the rest and his gut twisted whenever his eyes locked on it. Whether that was good or not was up for debate.

As the woods got thicker and the area rockier, the air seemed to thicken and the heat became oppressive. This felt like he was baking alive, unlike the drier heat of the desert. He never thought he’d look fondly on the days riding with Drogo across the Dothraki Sea, but at least he could get a breeze there. Having a horse doing most of the work also had helped, here his muscles burned with the effort exerted each day as he scrambled over boulders, climbed down deep inclines and maneuvered around dense undergrowth. The only bright side was that most of the insects tended to leave him be, the few that he found anyway. Whatever had happened here those centuries ago had wiped out a good portion of the wildlife on top of the people that once lived here. Truly it was surprising anything lived here, or thrived in some cases, but nature was more resilient that most people thought. Though as a member of the north he probably should have expected it.

As for other wildlife, a few small rodents scurried here and there, and a bird or two called this place home, but very little more than that. He’d seen a snake or two and even some fish, but it was nowhere as bountiful as other places he’d been. Even in the north he’d seen more life, and that was after a heavy snow! At least the water seemed unspoiled, allowing him to drink his fill when he couldn’t get enough food to supplement his supplies. He also still ate one fruit each day as instructed by the old soothsayer. Really he should find some way to repay her, because he would no doubt have perished from sheer exhaustion if not for her miracle concoction.

It especially helped as he started into the higher elevations. Where the air was once dense and nearly thick with heat, he now found it harder to catch his breath with a single lungful. It also grew colder, which was a relief for him. While he had grown used to the heat, he still enjoyed the familiar touch of cold he’d grown up with. On the downside, as the foliage thinned out at these heights the path grew more treacherous as rock had a tendency to slide away at any given moment.
Still he pushed on, the pull in his gut growing stronger each day as he continued to climb the ridges and peaks of his chosen mountain. He supposed his ancestors were right, he would ‘know’ where he was going once here, not that he could confirm it with them. Since the dream he shared with Ghost the first night, he’d not entered the dream realm. Something about this island was stopping him from doing so.

The worst part was sometimes he could not believe his own eyes. The scenery seemed to shift, or trees would suddenly appear and disappear at random. More than once he found himself blinking his eyes or shaking his head to try and dispel the strange images. Sometimes it seemed like nature was about to come to life to attack him, though he knew he was being foolish. On some occasions though, he even saw shadows of people and heard their voices, but he knew it to be untrue. So he kept pushing forward refusing to listen to the illusions. One by one they stopped, though on occasion they still tried to steer him wrong. He held the advice to only trust his own instincts to heart, even when his other senses tried to tell him otherwise.

Truly this was a cursed land and he could not wait to get this part of his journey over with. He knew he was close.

The island seemed to know it too, for days before he reached the summit a fierce storm slammed down upon the mountaintop as if the gods decided to throw all their might upon him. The wind howled and the rain pelted him, mixed with icy bits of hail, some as large as his hand. He had been forced to find shelter within a cave, or risk death. Never before had he seen such a fierce storm, not even in the north.

It took time to find his shelter, as the mountain did not have many crannies for him to utilize. The way was also slick and wrought with danger, causing him to slip more than once. It was pure luck he did not suffer more than shallow cuts and bruises.

Finally he found a small crack in the sheer cliff wall allowing him to slip through and find a decent sized cavern to take shelter in. Peeling his bag off he about collapsed to the ground, pulling the tattered edges of his cloak around him for some semblance of warmth. Even if he preferred the cooler weather he was not foolish enough to remain exposed to it for long. The first lesson anyone learned in the north was the cold was a slow silent killer.

Leaning against the uneven wall behind him he closed his eyes, breathing as evenly as he could. It had become easier over time, but still he could feel his chest burn with the lack of air at this height. Honestly he thought this peak might even be higher than the Wall. He would have to compare with Uncle Benjen if he made it out.

Thinking of his uncle had his mind drifting to his family. He hoped Arya, Bran and Rickon were doing well and were not too angry with him. From what his uncle told him in the dream they had received his letters, so that was a boon. He even mentioned Robb had changed from how he acted previously. Jon was unsure if he believed that. Words were wind, he relied more on actions. He supposed he would have to withhold judgment until he saw for himself. However, it was a nice thought to think he might regret what he did to Jon, and that even Sansa missed him. Hopefully his father was not too upset with him either. Then again he did believe Jon when he told him about the danger beyond the Wall. He traveled there to verify Jon’s claims and found a direwolf. He even spoke to the Free Folk and was working to bring them south. Maybe they would have a chance against the Night’s King and his army of the dead?

With those thoughts he started to drift off, his mind and body tired from weeks of travel and constant strain. In doing so he did not see the aged golden eyes watching over him from deeper within the cavern.
“I will kill the little brat,” Oswell Whent bellowed for the umpteenth time, as he stomped around the deck of the Shy Maiden in a fury.

Young Griff watched the legendary knight with barely concealed amusement, along with the other members of the crew. The knight had been ranting and raving since they had discovered him and his companion in the crate Jon had paid them to carry.

He had met Jon in Volon Therys when he was wandering around the market place. Had literally run into the slighter boy, almost knocking the lad to the ground. When he’d looked into those grey eyes he’d felt something, though he’d dismissed it as simple lust. The boy was a gorgeous, with a slim figure and androgynous features. In truth he’d thought Jon was a female at first until he spoke, his low raspy voice belying his effeminate features.

The boy had gazed at him in what he thought was awe at the time, a real ego-stroker if he was honest. Now he realized the other had recognized him for whom he was, Aegon Targaryen, Jon’s half brother. Yet the boy had never said anything, instead he tentatively formed a friendship with Aegon, or Young Griff as he went by. Well, really it was Aegon who made sure to keep running into Jon until the boy started seeking him out to spend time together. Aegon had grown to like Jon as a person and as one of the few people close to his age; he relished the chance to spend time with Jon. If he had a slight crush on him that was no never mind.

At one time Septa Lenore caught him with Jon, sparing and he thought she would warn him away from the other boy. She was worried others would realize who he was and put him in danger. However, she’d simply given him a strange look and said nothing. It was rare for Lenore, or as few knew Ashara Dayne, to keep her thoughts to herself. She was a very strong and outspoken woman. She and his foster father Griff (Jon Connington) fought constantly, much to the amusement of the rest of the crew.

Aegon had been sad when his foster father had declared they would be setting sail soon for Myr. Strangely his first thought had been to find Jon to tell him and see if he wanted to join their crew. Never had he given such a thought to someone he had known less than a moon. Yet he just felt connected to Jon, and now he knew why.

Before they left Jon had brought him a large crate, even paid the ridiculous faire the captain had charged to ship it. Most thought it odd the crate had holes, but shrugged it off, as cargo was cargo. At the time Jon was reluctant and seemed a bit shifty. Aegon thought it meant he was sad to see him go. No doubt Jon was sad, but his behavior had more to do with guilt, as they would come to find out in a few days after they left port.

A few of the crew had heard strange banging sounds in the hold. Some of the more superstitious had panicked, thinking a ghost had come to get them. Finally his father had had enough and marched down to the hold with some of their men. Aegon had watched as Griff had come upon the large crate, only to blink when he heard very distinct, human, voices. It had taken little time to get it open without harming the men inside. His father had been wary, thinking them stowaways. Until they spilled onto the ground before them.

It was Lenore that revealed their identities as she cried her brother’s name in shocked awe. Even Griff had recognized the two men, looking more stunned than Aegon had ever seen the man. Still it was not every day one had the great, and allegedly dead, Ser Arthur Dayne and Ser Oswell Whent just appear on their ship. Especially not the ship that just so happens to house the firstborn son of
It took a bit of time, mostly because Whent was cursing up a storm and demanding they bring Jon to them. Arthur Dayne was surprisingly quiet. In fact it made Aegon uncomfortable how silent the man had been, even after realizing his sister was alive and well. Apparently the Dayne siblings had a thing for pretending to be dead.

It came out, piece by piece, about how they had come to Volon Therys, with Jon, or more accurately Jaehaerys Targaryen, Aegon’s younger brother. That had been a revelation. Whenever Griff spoke of his father and the woman he ran away with he never mentioned they had been married in the way of Targaryens of old. Nor had he mentioned his mother had sanctioned and even blessed the marriage. When Aegon had turned to the man he remained stubbornly tightlipped on the subject.

The two knights had not searched him out because they had believed what everyone else in Westeros thought, that the Mountain had killed him as an infant. They did admit to trying to help Viserys, but his uncle had refused them for some reason. He had heard rumors his uncle was more like his grandfather than anyone else. While Griff may not be willing to speak of Aerys, Lenore had no problem telling him exactly what she knew of the events before the Rebellion.

Granted Griff was biased and angry with everyone on the Usurper’s side, especially the Starks. Lenore said he was just jealous that Rhaeger chose Lyanna as a second wife. Aegon carefully ignored that statement.

Instead he focused on the issue at hand. If Jon had been with the two knights and knew his identity, why then did he ‘trap’ the two knights on his ship? Why did he not come too?

Griff, of course, was convinced Jon was planning to sell them out to Baratheon, as he had Stark blood and all Starks were loyal dogs to the fake king. Oswell flat out told him the boy would never do that, backed by Arthur who had not said much up to that point. Indeed the Dayne knight looked to be analyzing what had occurred in his mind.

“He was planning to travel to Volantis,” the man muttered, more to himself than the rest of them. “He always seemed to be studying the map of southern Essos…”

“Volantis,” Duck asked curiously, leaning against the railing of the ship.

“Aye, the little brat was stuck on going there;” Oswell huffed irritably. “Said he wanted to see the last city that held Valyrian customs.”

Griff scoffed. “More like he’ll be trying to gather allies to rise against Aegon and take the throne for himself;” he snapped angrily. “If you two hadn’t told the boy of his heritage the bastard wouldn’t have gotten such grand ideas.”

“For the last time he is NOT a bastard, you blow hard,” Oswell growled back. “And don’t act like you had no knowledge of Rhaeger’s plans with Lady Lyanna, you knew just as much as the rest of us, you just chose to ignore it and pretend it wasn’t happening.”

“If I had known I would have advised him against it,” Griff yelled. “As it was I had to leave or face being burnt by Aerys!”

“Valyria,” Arthur suddenly spoke, his tone tinged with realization and dread.

“What about it Arthur,” Ashara asked her brother, well aware of his tendencies when it came to thinking.
“It wasn’t Volantis he was studying,” Arthur informed them, his eyes wide with fear. “It was Valyria. The boy is going to those cursed islands.”

“I admit he’s young and foolhardy at times, but even Jon is not so stupid,” Oswell denied.

“Not if there was something he was searching for,” Arthur stated firmly. “Haven’t you noticed how distracted he has been? How often he asked us about what we knew about the Wall and the old legends? How he sometimes knew things he could not have known?” When the other knight just shook his head, Arthur practically sneered in frustration. “Something is driving the boy to that place. Something he didn’t think we would believe. And when he saw Aegon he figured it would be better for us to protect Rhaeger’s ‘true’ son instead of him, as he still sees himself as a bastard. He probably guessed, and rightly so, that if he told us his true destination we would have refused to let him go.”

“Well of course we would! Valyria’s a death trap,” Oswell grumbled petulantly.

Aegon felt his heart drop at the thought of Jon facing such danger. His friend… brother, was so small and delicate. Why would he feel he needed to go to the cursed islands? Even Aegon had never felt a desire to go there, and he shared the same ancestry. So what was Jon looking for?

“We need to go back,” Arthur declared. “We need to find him.”

“We can’t,” Griff argued. “We’re due to meet a contact in Myr. If we don’t show up it would raise suspicions. Plus we have cargo to deliver. We need the money to survive.”

When Arthur looked ready to argue Ashara stepped in. “Brother. Even if we turned back now the boy has too large of a head start. It would be unlikely you will find him, and you do not even know if he truly went to Valyria. Let us make the journey to Myr, we will be returning this way after, we can search for him then.” Arthur didn’t look any happier. “I know you owe Rhaeger to look after his son, but is Aegon not also his son, and Elia’s?”

The question caused the knight to flinch, making Aegon think there was A LOT more to the relations of the past he had no idea about. Whent looked mutinous, but also torn. Both men acknowledged they had a duty to House Targaryen, and Jon had put them in Aegon’s hands for a reason.

“Surely one of us can go and the other stay to protect the pri… uh Young Griff,” Oswell compromised.

“Even if we stopped at the nearest port it would take a week to get there and even more time to find a ship back,” Aegon pointed out. “As Ashara said we will be headed back there within the moon. We know that area well, so we would be able to help search for Jon.”

“Aeg,” Griff barked in disbelief.

Amethyst eyes locked onto his foster father’s. “He’s family. I felt a connection to him, though I knew not why at the time. I do not believe Jon is planning to ‘betray’ my identity to the Usurper. The way he spoke of his plans for travel… he had a purpose, a goal, though I cannot say what. However, I would like to know, so I intend to find out.”

Griff glowered at him but when Aegon refused to bend the man threw his hands in the air. “Fine! But if he betrays us on your head it will be!”

He then stormed off to the helm, refusing to look back at the group, Duck trailing behind him. Aegon turned to the two Kingsguard.
“Can you tell me more about Jon?”
It was a few days after their guests’ arrival that Benjen arrived at Winterfell. Ned had been in his solar with his family, having finished up the latest batch of Jon’s letters when Luwin informed him his brother had just ridden in. Ned frowned as he was not expecting his brother anytime soon, and part of him feared what news came from the Wall if he had to be sent word in person. The more rational part reminded him Mormont would have sent word by Raven if it was anything dire, and from what he knew the resettling of the Free Folk clans in the Gift and the New Gift was going well, if slowly.

It had taken time to hammer out a deal that would be agreed upon by all. There would still be skirmishes on both sides, but now with their leaders working together it was far less and more manageable. Ned’s actions in reminding the North of old laws regarding children, regardless of status and working to repair roads and open communications had helped quite a bit. People no longer felt as cut off and those who may not have been born in good standing still had the opportunity for a decent life. He had also had his Lords and Ladies look into giving the basic teachings to all children under the age of ten. While those of noble birth would still have better advantages, at least his people would be able to read basic words and complete math so as to not get cheated.

This actually came about due to the continued trading with Master Khan. It had expanded a bit, as the two explored what goods or raw materials each area could use and/or provide. The influx in wealth, though perhaps not gold or silver, still helped to provoke further trade in the North. Often goods were now used to help pay wages, as many in the North were ever practical and food filled a belly more than gold anyhow. In fact, this flourishing trade had led him to not only fix old roads, but also build a few new ones and even a few canals. He had made sure to include his sons in his planning meetings to show his sons how to go about such projects should they ever need it. Bran had especially enjoyed these lessons and even added some good ideas. Robb got much out of them as well, though he was more martially minded than his younger sibling. Rickon was still at the age where he preferred to play with the marker pieces than actually listen, but Ned would take what he could.

Now with the influx of Free Folk they had even more options for trade. Their tribes had lived on the idea of trading goods verse actual money and had many different crafts surprisingly enough. They were also exceptionally good at fishing and curing meats to make them last longer. Their jerky was becoming very popular in the north and even a few of the men from Master Khan’s fleets had grown to enjoy this new product. There were also ‘healers’ among the Free Folk that practiced more herbal remedies than Maesters’ did, which led to some interesting debates between the two factions and several new techniques for healing and medicines. Well, new according to the Maesters. The Free Folk just snorted, reminding them these practices were as old as the First Men.

Truly the North had started to flourish in these past years. It would never have the same infrastructure or apparent wealth as the South, but life had been made easier for all of his people, which was the bigger priority in Ned’s mind. His people seemed to agree wholeheartedly.

Still, Mormont would not have sent Benjen unless it was important, as Benjen would usually notify him before time if he planned to visit. Then again, his brother still was not happy about the events leading to Jon’s disappearance and the way Ned had informed him of such. He’d taken to being a bit more petulant in his letters, so perhaps this was part of his little rebellious act to show his continued irritation?

He’d asked Luwin to tell his brother he’d be with his shortly, as he had only just sent for Prince
Oberyn a moment before. Jon had surprisingly left a letter for the man in the batch he’d sent to his siblings. No doubt Jon knew Ned would make sure the man received it, but why not just give it to the prince when he’d been with the man?

In fact just as Luwin left to relay his message the Prince came in, as brightly dressed as usual, even with the thick furs to cover him. Ned bit back the smirk that wanted to form every time he saw the southerner’s in the Keep. Honestly, it wasn’t even that cold, and Winterfell was downright sweltering due to the hot springs running through the piping in the walls. Yet Oberyn and his people seem to think they’ve reached the Land of Always Winter. The man would certainly get a shock if he did go visit the Wall.

“You asked for me Lord Stark,” the prince greeted jovially, waving to the children when they called out to him.

“Yes, thank you for coming, I apologize for interrupting your private time,” Ned responded genially. “It appears that Jon sent you a letter in with the batch he sent us, though I confess I am confused as to why.”

“Indeed,” Oberyn murmured with a frown, taking the proffered letter, still sealed. “Especially as he could have told me in person. If I may…”

Ned waved him on not minding if the man read the letter here. Checking the time he directed his children to get to their lessons for the day, not buckling against their collective groans and pleas to stay and re-read Jon’s letters. Even he could admit there were some funny ones this time, especially the incident with Master Oz and a group of groundhogs. He wondered what his children would think if they realized one of the legendary knights they grew up hearing about was prone to such childish actions. Ah well, maybe he’d tell them one day. Thankfully most of Jon’s letters this time were relatively boring in the fact he had not had any heart attack inducing adventures or battles, aside from the small incident in Volantis. Reading it from Jon’s point of view had been interesting, his description of the Prince even more so. Best not to let Oberyn hear about that. Then again the man would probably find it amusing and flattering. He seemed strange like that.

Suddenly the door to his solar burst open allowing Benjen entrance. Part of Ned wanted to scold his brother; the rest of him was resigned to his behavior. Honestly, was he the ONLY one to learn manners?

Before he could snap at his brother though, Prince Oberyn let out a rather impressive amount of explicative curses that made Ned glad he had sent the children off. He turned to see the man staring wildly at the parchment held tightly in his hands.

“Ah, got Jon’s letter about Aegon then,” Benjen remarked casually as he closed the door tightly behind him.

Both Ned and Oberyn snapped their eyes to the Black Brother.

“Aegon?”

“How did you know?”

“Yes Aegon, Jon met him in his travels through Volon Therys,” Benjen huffed as he made his way over to the small cupboard that held a cask of ale and some skins of wine, pouring himself a rather generous. “As for how I know. He told me about it. In a dream.”

Both Lord and Prince stared at the other man blankly for a moment as he made himself comfortable
in one of Ned’s stuffed chairs by the fire. Ned had the overwhelming urge to throttle his sibling. From the twitching of his hands it seemed Oberyn felt the same.

“Benjen,” Ned started slowly, through gritted teeth. “I suggest you explain.”

When his brother merely raised a brow at him in that overly cheeky way he used to do as a child, Ned narrowed his eyes and returned the look with an equally dark one. It didn’t take long for his brother to crumble under the silent threat.

“Some months ago I was drawn into a dream,” he explained calmly to his audience. “I found myself in a Gods Wood, which mimicked the one here in Winterfell, though the face of the Heart Tree was vastly different. I at first thought I was being pulled into Bear’s mind again, as I have been warging more and more.” Oberyn looked confused but Ned gestured for him to hold his questions. He too had strange dreams where he seemed to see through his wolf’s eyes. A quick letter to Mance had explained quite a bit. “Imagine my surprise when the beast was next to me and I could see father sitting on the roots, holding Jon in his arms. Apparently Jon needed some reassurance from family about his notions on his worth.”

Ned let out a pained sigh as he closed his eyes. He knew Jon knew his true heritage yet he couldn’t imagine the feelings and thoughts that provoked. The treatment he received up to his leaving had certainly not helped the boy’s confidence. Then add the fact he grew up as a bastard, which has a stigma all its own, when he was actually a trueborn, had to have been a blow.

“Maester Aemon was there too, shockingly. Man could actually see again, something he has been unable to do for the past decade. Together we managed to reassure him that he is indeed important to HIS family, regardless of birth,” Benjen continued, looking meaningfully at Ned. Ned frowned in censor. While Prince Oberyn has been far more pleasant than expected, Benjen was getting dangerously close to revealing things the Prince should NOT know. “It was then we discussed why he was upset and what was happening in his life, as well as what his future plans were. I can tell you I was not happy in the least.”

“And why did Jon not tell me he had run into his half-brother,” Prince Oberyn asked icily.

Ned’s head snapped to the man, mouth gapped in disbelief. When had he?

The prince looked his way shrugging blithely. “He shares Rhaenys’ smile. It was not hard to put the pieces together after that. Especially once remembering three Kingsguard were at the tower to watch over Lady Lyanna.” He paused studying Ned thoughtfully. “I do not blame you for hiding the boy. I would have done the same had I known any of my sister’s children lived. I also know Elia approved of Rhaeger’s second marriage. And even if she had not, I would never hold a child responsible for the actions of their parents. It is not the Dornish way.”

Ned relaxed a little, the tension in his shoulders ebbing. “If only more people thought that way.”

“Still, I do not understand why he did not tell me,” the prince groused.

“He was worried you would question him on HOW he knew it was Aegon and that you’d force him to take you to where he last saw him, if you didn’t kill him first,” Benjen sighed running a hand through his hair. “He couldn’t let you keep him from his journey.”

“What journey,” Ned demanded, not liking the way Benjen said that. “And did he tell you why he is separated from Dayne and Whent?” He noted Oberyn’s eyes widening at the names a bit. Well, he knew about Jon, so in for a stag in for a crown.
“Oh, you’re going to love this,” Benjen stated sarcastically. “Apparently our dear Jon felt the two knights would, and rightly so, keep him from his destination, which he has no doubt reached by now. So, to keep them from stopping him, he DRUGGED them, then PACKED them into a crate and SHIPPED them, on Aegon’s ship. He figured this way Aegon would have the protection of the best Kingsguards in history as he is the TRUE son of Rhaeger and they would clearly prefer to protect him once they found he was alive.”

Ned couldn’t help but stare at his brother in disbelief. Jon had actually drugged and essentially shipped his two guardians?

Oberyn had snorted at first, his shoulders shaking slightly in his mirth, shocking the two Northmen. “He… he drugged and ‘shipped’ SER Arthur Dayne and Oswell Whent? Two of the most formidable swordsmen to live in the past century? A boy of four and ten outsmarted them?” At Benjen’s nod he finally broke down into outright laughter.

Okay, Ned could admit when put that way it was very humorous and he’d likely laugh about it later, in private. However, from the look on his brother’s face he was not going to like the rest of this conversation.

“So where is it exactly that Jon has traveled to that his once guardians would have disapproved,” he queried once Oberyn had managed to calm a bit.

“Valyria.”

One simple word had never left such a feeling of cold dread sinking through his very being. Even Oberyn had silenced immediately upon the utterance of that word.

“I believe I have heard you wrong, brother,” Ned insisted quietly.

“You didn’t and you know it,” Benjen retorted blankly. He then continued clearly knowing what both men were going to ask next. “He said he felt a pull to go there. That his gut is telling him he can find something there that will help in the coming war. He even said he has dreams of his other ancestors, and a certain Dreamer told him he had to go there. So now, our nephew is risking his life to find some mystic weapon to help the north fight against the coming threat.”


Ned and Benjen shared a silent conversation before Ned turned to the Dornish prince. “Let me tell you why I took a trip to the Wall and beyond and why I am now demanding back taxes from the rest of the kingdom.”
A strange presence niggled at his mind bringing Jon out of his slumber. It didn’t feel like anything dangerous, still after being alone for so long he could not help but react to the sudden new presence. He rolled out of his position, gripping his sword and scanning the area of dangers. He froze as he realized he’d been moved. He was no longer towards the main entrance of the cave, in fact he was not really sure where he was.

The cavern was vast, almost as large at the Great Hall back in Winterfell. Most of the rock had a dark tint to it, a few even glittering from what daylight broke through the cracks in the ceiling. Turning he tried to find any openings or hiding places he could utilize or from where his enemies might attack.

He stopped cold when he saw the wall behind him, or more specifically the great Weirwood tree pushing up through and around the rocks of the cavern. The limbs reached towards the top of the cavern ceiling, some even breaking through to grasp towards the sky. Beams of sunlight danced through the blood red leaves and along the white bark, shining against the dark black rocks trapping the ancient giant. Unlike the other Weirwood trees Jon had seen, this one had more than one face etched into its trunk. In fact, it had several; all of them crying red sap that lined the bark in vertical stripes.

Jon could not help but gap at the tree, shocked it even existed on this island. He had thought such trees were native only to Westeros. There had never been any mention of the Old Gods being apart of the Valyrian society. In fact the Andels (which included the Valyrians) had been the ones to bring the Seven to the shores of the First Men, pushing those who believed in the Old Gods further north. Even now the Seven’s faith continues to try and usurp the ways of the First Men.

So how then, did this Heart Tree, a staple of the Old Gods, come to be growing high in the Valyrian mountains?

“Before the First Men or even the Andals walked this earth, it was the Children that lived in all places,” a smooth yet aged voice echoed through the cavern.

Jon could admit he jumped from the sudden sound, spinning around violently to find the speaker. It was not until he turned back to the great tree that he saw the small form sitting on one of the great roots.

She looked tiny, no bigger than a child of eight or nine. Her head was slightly large, and her eyes were wide and golden. Her skin was very similar to the bark of a tree, though it was grey with green and brown interspersed. The clothing she wore, if it could be called that, looked more like giant leaves woven together. Her arms and legs down to her fingers and toes looked more like branched of trees than actual limbs. Instead of hair she had more leaves and blades of grass, though they too looked older and drier than what one would expect of a living being. In all she looked otherworldly, but Jon knew in his heart just what he was looking at.

“You… you’re one of the Children of the Forest…”

“I am,” she answered, her tone reminding him of Old Nan when she was humoring him as a child.

“How…”

“Am I here,” she finished for him. “I am very old young one. I have lived here for many centuries, before even the first men stepped foot into our lands. Come, sit, and I shall tell you the truth of our
history.” She pointed to the large root opposite of her.

Jon hesitated for a moment, remembering the stories Old Nan used to tell. “But… I thought your kind hated men? Why would you wish to speak to me?”

“Because you have come for the truth,” she told him seriously. “And you are the one that can put an end to the greatest mistake my kind has ever committed.”

Though Jon was sure he could have protested something in him urged him to do as she said. The fact she reminded him greatly of many of the older women of the north, whom he would NEVER disobey under threat of severe pain, probably had a lot to do with his acceptance as well. What can he say? Those old women were no-nonsense and you did not disobey them when they spoke.

So Jon released his grip on his sword and slowly made his way to the other root, keeping the old creature in his sights at all times. Carefully he sat down, instantly feeling comforted by the closeness of the Weirwood. It had a similar feel to the Weirwood trees of the north.

“Um… may… may I know your name milady,” he stammered, blushing as he realized he had forgotten his manners. One thing all of the women back home, even Lady Stark, enforced on him was proper manners. If they heard he had forgotten them they’d probably smack him upside his head a few times.

The creature smiled. “I am called Seed, young one.”

“That is a lovely name, milady,” he replied, remembering one of the few pieces of advice about women Sansa was adamant that he knew and used. “I am Jon.”

“Well met young Jon,” Seed greeted, her eyes crinkling with humor. “Though I do believe that is not your birth name.”

Jon fidgeted a bit. “Um… you said something about the truth of the past?”

Seed chuckled but obliged the boy by moving on. “In the beginning there were only plants and animals. The Gods them decided to create my people, the Children, to tend this world. For many centuries we tended to the land and the animals, peace reigned. The days were full of love and comfort. Then the gods decided to create a new creature. Man.”

Jon sat riveted as he stared at Seed. Her voice was even more mesmerizing than Old Nan’s.

“Man was much like us, yet different all the same. They cared not as much about the land and the animals. They focused more on their own wants and needs. At first it was not much, but soon they spread across the lands,” she explained solemnly. Jon felt the need to apologize, yet the words were stuck in his throat. “Many of us wondered why the gods would create such destructive beings, but it was not our right to judge their decisions. Slowly many of us were pushed from our homes, the numbers of man too much even for our magic.

A few others and myself chose to stay, hiding within the nature men kept thriving. We knew, that like all things, our time would end on this world, and men would continue on until their time came and another species took over. Some of the younger ones though… they chose to fight. They refused to let our kind perish and for man to destroy all we held dear. They refused to believe this was the will of the gods. We warned them many times not to disrupt the balance; the time of magic was coming to an end. However, they refused to listen.

There were many battles here in these lands before they were pushed towards the lands you have come from. Their use of magic against men caused a reaction they were not expecting. Men began to
gain magic of their own. It was only a few, for there must always be balance in the world, but it was enough. The rebels were forced to flee this part of the world, the few that were left, and they took their war to the other land, which had not been populated just yet by man.

Those of us left took great pains to hide our presence, and a few men even helped, respecting our rights to live as they did. Some were not lucky and were hunted out of existence, wiped from the very history of this world.

As the Children continued to fight on the other continent, their war drew on and became more desperate. The First Men were different though, respecting nature and the land around them, and for a time they could live in a tentative peace. However, like many groups that live in a tense fragile peace it did not take long for the fighting to continue. Soon the young ones deemed they needed another way to fight men, who were always innovative and resourceful. So they pooled their knowledge across ancient spells that had been forbidden by our kind. For these spells are dark and dangerous, an affront to the very nature we were made to protect. However, desperation makes for poor decisions.”

She paused for a moment as if the information was too painful to mention. Jon didn’t dare say a word or even breath. He knew what she said next would be very important.

“They had an ally that was willing to help them. A man from a great house of the First Men. He told them he wanted to save the Children and bring the world back to the way it was. He was very charismatic and persuasive. The Children believed he truly wanted to help their cause, so they performed the magic needed to give him the power to help them battle men.”

Jon felt his stomach drop with dread as Seed pulled up a vision of the event. He could see the man tied to one of the ancient Weirwood trees. He was struggling, but it did no good. A Child of the Forest approached him, others standing back chanting. The Child forced something into the man’s chest, directly over his heart. As it sank beneath his skin the man’s eyes bled blue, the same color of the Walker Jon had run into in his dreams. His skin then began to turn from a healthy pink to the cold greyish blue he recognized easily. The whole process seemed to happen in slow motion, though Jon knew it was in an instant.

The picture shifted, showing the newly created Walker, leading others.

“However, they were deceived,” Seed continued. “This man did not want to help the Children, he wanted their power. Though he was a strong man, he was not the first son, and no one would follow him over his kin, for he was not a good man. He had grown bitter and spiteful and decided he would use the power of the Children to destroy all who opposed him. For a time he let the Children believe he was still helping them, but once he gained full control over his new abilities, he began to rebel. The Children thought they could stop him easily. They were wrong. For this man wanted the world to bow before him. Thus he created his own minions and became the Night King.”

The view changed showing the growing war and the destruction the Night King wrought against the lands.

“Soon the Children had to turn to the very men they had fought to find a solution to stop the Night King and his minions. It went on for years, the fighting growing more violent. Many lives were lost. It was not until the might of the Starks, led by Brandon the Builder and he remaining Children came together that they were able to stop the Night King. They managed to destroy the minions and the Wights created by the Night King, but not the king himself. They only had enough power to weaken him drive him deep into the far reaches of the North in the Land of Always Winter. Spells were laid
on the Wall your ancestor built for the time when the Night King would rise again, for they knew he would come again once he regained his power. When a Stark serves at the Wall, the spells grow stronger. They are also tied to Winterfell, and as long as a person of Stark blood resides within the Keep the Spells remain locked. If the Keep is empty of Starks for any amount of time, the spells will weaken.

The Night King has begun to strengthen once more. He is weak and it will take him time to gather enough power to launch his campaign once more, but already he is creating his minions and calling on the dead to serve his needs. It will not be too many years from now that he will be able to strike and the world will be in danger once more.”

Jon frowned at this, already knowing it was true given the dreams he had experienced. He remembered vividly the deep unsettling fear he felt when facing the Walker, and he KNEW in his heart that was not the Night King. This only worried him more as he could not imagine the terror HE would inflict.

“Is… is there any way to stop them? Drive him back or defeat him completely,” Jon asked, desperation tingeing his voice. From what he gathered from conversations with his ancestors Jon was supposed to be able to stop this foe. Yet he couldn’t even begin to imagine HOW he would do so. If his ancestor, Bran the Builder, one of the greatest Starks in history could not defeat this foe, how could he?

“Because you have something Bran did not,” Seed informed him kindly, reminding him of her apparent ability to read his mind. “You have not only the blood of the Starks, but the blood of the Targaryens as well. You carry the magic of ice and fire within you. Never before has any being held both,” Seed explained calmly. “Because of this only you can brandish the weapon that can destroy the Night King once and for all.”

“So there is a way to kill him,” Jon clarified, hope building within him.

“Once we learned what the other Children had done, the few of us left prayed to the gods for direction. It came to us in dreams and we pooled what power we had into the creation of this weapon. However, the gods had declared that only a child of their choosing would be able to wield this weapon. This child would resonate with the Song of Ice and Fire, a child that represents the true balance of the world. That child is you.”

“How can you be so sure,” Jon whispered painfully. His fear and doubt clear to read. “I am not even a man grown. I have been raised all my life to believe I am nothing more than a bastard, who had less worth than a peasant. Even though I know the truth now, I can sometimes scarcely believe it. How can I possibly be this great hero you are all expecting, when I feel as if I am nothing but a green boy?”

“You cherish life but understand that sometimes one must kill in order to survive. You have been punished for crimes you did not commit, yet instead of taking revenge you chose a different path, a better path. You risk your life for those you do not even know, simply because it is the right thing to do,” Seed listed out. “You have a character and resolve that only the purest of hearts can truly claim. You are not perfect, no one is, but you also do not hide behind words and masks. More importantly, you will stand against the Long Night even if you were not the Promised Prince, simply because you desire to protect those who cannot protect themselves.”

A flush spread over his cheeks at the words she uttered, surprised she seemed to think so much of him. If only his own doubts and misgivings didn’t cloud his mind, perhaps he could believe it as well.
“Doubt is not so unusual,” Seed pointed out, her eyes full of knowledge. “But I can easily prove it and put some of those thoughts to rest.” She waved her hand and the far side of the cavern seemed to melt away. On a pedestal there lay a sword, the size of a bastard sword, his preferred weapon (he had not enjoyed the irony when he first started practicing with one on Ser Roderik’s command). “That blade will only allow the one truly able to wield it to even pick it up. If you are not worthy, if you are not the one, the blade’s magic will reject you and remain where it has rested until the right person comes along.”

Jon stared at the blade, taking in what details he could see from this distance. Even in the darkness of the cavern he could tell the blade was made of Valyrian steel, though the metal was darker than the normal smoky hues. It was plainer than most Valyrian steel swords. Even Ice, a rather simple sword by southern standings, had more ornamentation than this blade. Yet, to Jon it seemed perfect. He’d never cared for overly decorated weapons, finding it either weakened or cheapened the blade.

Jon felt a pull to it, like an old friend calling out to him.

Just as he was reaching the pedestal holding the blade he heard a sharp cry from Seed. Turning back his eyes grew wide in disbelief at the image in front of him. The faces of the God tree were glowing as was the outline of the tree. A large split had formed in the tree, the edges also glowing but the middle was pure darkness. Worse, emerging from the tree was one of the Others, its tall menacing form clad in rough leathers, a sword of actual ice held in one hand, the blade pushing into Seed’s shoulder.

“Seed,” he yelled out before he could think differently, gaining the attention of the terrible creature before him.

“The sword Jon! Use the sword!” Those were the only words she could get out before the Walker threw her into the cavern wall, turning to brandish its weapon at him.

Jon felt his heart speed up as he stared at this foe. It was the same being he’d seen in his dream, but how could it have come here through the God tree? Surely the spells on the Wall would have stopped that? His thoughts were broken when the Walker advanced. His first instinct was to grab his own blade, pulling it forth to brandish at the creature. Its mouth twisted in a sick rendition of a smile, as it swung it’s blade at him. He moved his sword to block, as he’d done hundreds of times in the same situation. Only this time when the blades met, his shattered into a thousand pieces, the blow throwing him off balance. In his shock he barely managed to leap away from his attacker. For one blinding moment he feared he had no way to protect himself, when something caught the edge of his sight.

The pull he had felt from the sword on the pedestal became even stronger than before. There was only one chance for him to fight this creature. Making sure to keep his foe in his line of sight he lunged for the weapon.
Oberyn stared at the picture Stark had given him of the Walker. He’d seen the pictures of the giants and mammoths, but this… He wasn’t so sure he could believe this. The history surrounding why the Wall had been built was sparse, especially in the south and at the citadel. The Maesters disliked anything that spoke of magic or superstition, feeling it was nothing but lies and hearsay. Most people now believed that aside from Wildlings, the Wall only held back snarks and grumpkins.

Apparently those assumptions were wrong.

“And you say you have seen these creatures,” he prodded for more information, his mind whirling at the possibilities.

“No, we have seen the wights created by them. Dead men and women animated to be used as weapons against the living,” Lord Stark explained solemnly. “We have confirmed that some of the Free Folk have seen the Others, but thankfully they have not come too far south from the Fist of the North Men. Yet.”

“That is why you are bringing the Wildlings…uh Free Folk south of the Wall,” he confirmed. “To keep them from being turned into an army of the dead?”

“We know it sounds unbelievable,” Benjen Stark cut in impatiently. “Gods know I never wanted to believe it, but truth is you don’t build a wall of ice seven hundred feet tall to keep out some men and giants. Those same men and giants wouldn’t be gathering together for protection from snow and ice either.”

Oberyn wanted to comment but the door to the solar burst open allowing Stark’s son Bran to enter.

“Bran,” Stark scolded only to be interrupted by the frantic boy.

“Father you must come quick,” he blurted out. “The Heart Tree is glowing and the direwolves are all upset, refusing to move from the Gods wood, especially Jon’s wolf!”

The men shared confused looks before following the boy out. As they made their way to the Gods wood they could see a strange glow emanating from within. Several people had stopped to stare at the sight in either wonder or fear. When they entered the woods Oberyn found his own children there along with the Stark children and a few of the higher-ranking servants. Maester Luwin looked so shell shocked as he stared at the tree that was indeed glowing that Oberyn feared the man would faint.

As the child had stated all of the direwolves were facing the tree, growling or barking at it, their hair standing up at what they perceived a threat. At the very front of the group was the small white wolf, stock still with his red eyes locked on the tree, his form crouched as if ready to pounce. Though he was only the size of a hound, Oberyn had no doubt he could still do damage if threatened.

When he look at the tree though, his blood froze in his veins. The face of the Heart Tree was glowing an eerie red, the red sap flowed heavily as if it was actively crying. These trees had always left him feeling uneasy, but this was downright macabre. The rest of the tree glowed as power seemed to pulse around it, bringing an almost ethereal look to the tree.

He felt more than heard Ellaria slide up next to him, and the small hand that grabbed his own could only be Sarella’s. His other daughters were sure to be standing with them as well. To his left he could make out Lord Stark pulling his younger children back, the girl complaining the whole time.
Glancing he could see Lady Stark holding her youngest in her arms tightly and their oldest daughter beside her. Robb was out front, closest to the wolves.

A litany of gasps broke through when the eyes on the face grew wider and the glow brightened until the two orbs seemed to meld together making a large oval. Colors swirled in the center before pushing out allowing a picture to form. A large dark cavern came into view, the strange magical portal (and he really could not believe those words crossed his thoughts) grew larger allowing them a better look. Soon they were able to make out parts of another Weir tree and the small lithe form of a young boy.

“Jon!” The excited cry came from Arya Stark, her grey eyes hopeful. But the boy did not seem to hear them. His focus was on something else, something far more deadly.

When the second figure came into view more than a few people uttered curses and even a cry of shock. The creature from the picture he’d been shown in Stark’s solar had come to life, and it had its sights on Jon Snow.

They watched with baited breath as the boy brought his blade up in a solid block, only to feel despair and disbelief as the creature’s sword decimated the only defense Jon had. Oberyn curled his free hand into a fist, trying to control his emotions as he watched what was would surely be a massacre. At his side he could feel Sarella pushing her face into his tunic, trying to stifle her cries.

His eyes scanned the scene trying to see if there was any way for Jon to survive this. His eyes fell onto a pedestal in the background, upon which lay a weapon. It was a good distance from the boy, but it may be his only hope. From his stance he could tell Jon knew this as well, his body poised to make a try for the blade. However, could he make it before the creature caught him?

Just as Jon moved a most surprising turn of events occurred. The small white wolf, so different from its siblings leapt into the air, at the glowing portal, its body disappearing into the light as if passing through a doorway. It reappeared on the other side, teeth latching onto the arm of the creature pulling it off course from Jon. It only distracted the being for a moment, the wolf not strong enough to handle such a creature. Indeed it soon found itself thrown against the cavern wall off to the side. But it had done its job in buying Jon enough time to grab the sword.

Still, what good would it do? The Walker had smashed through his prior sword. How does one fight against power like that if their weapons cannot hold?

This time when their blades met, Jon’s held steady. They could see the shock on the creature’s face, so sure it had been in its victory.

Oberyn felt a swell of hope well within him. He watched as Jon parried the beast, his movements practiced and sure. Now that he knew who had helped train him he could see pieces of Dayne’s style in his motions. He could also tell the boy was not trying to tarry or dally, he was looking for the kill shot and working hard to get it. Had his opponent not also been so skilled, he would have had it much sooner. Yet, finally he managed to catch the creature off guard, his sword swiping up through its torso in a beautiful arch. The White Walker exploded in a shower of ice, causing Jon to stumble just barely catching himself.

Cheers echoed through the Gods wood, the children calling out to Jon trying to catch his attention. It did not seem he could hear or even see them though as he moved around the cavern going first to his recovering Direwolf, then over to a figure they could not see. The Stark children still tried though, only to find disappointment when the light receded and the eyes of the Heart Tree returned to their normal position, the glow dying down to nothing. The younger wolves were all clambering around the base of the tree trying to sniff out their now lost sibling, their whines echoing the cries of the
children.

“Why couldn’t he hear us,” Arya shouted in frustration.

“What was that thing that attacked him,” Bran demanded, eyes wide with fright.

Lady Stark managed to hush them and push them back towards the Keep with the help of her Septa and the Maester. Ellaria followed with Sarella and Tyene. Nymeria and Obara chose to stay as did Robb, all of them still staring at the tree.

“I will speak to my brother,” Oberyn broke the silence. “I will make sure Dorne will help in this fight. Though we will need to find out what weapons are useful against these creatures.”

“Dragon glass and Valyrian steel,” Benjen stated confidently. “That’s what the Children told us. For Wights, fire works best. The sword Jon used… it looked like Valyrian steel; darker though.”

“We have very few of the second, but I know where there is a good deposit of the first in Dorne,” he murmured, thinking of the logistics and who he needed to contact once he got back. There would be much planning needed.

“Why hasn’t he changed much,” Robb spoke suddenly grabbing their attention.

“What do you mean,” Obara asked gruffly.

“He…he’s barely grown at all. I’ve already had a growth spurt, most boys our age have,” he struggled to explain. “But Jon has barely gained any height, and he’s far leaner than any boy our age… and he looks…feminine. I just don’t understand…”

“Everyone grows differently and at their own pace,” Lord Stark tried to reassure his son. “Maybe Jon has more of his other family’s blood than the Starks when it comes to his physic.”

“I… I don’t think that’s it Ned,” Benjen spoke up reluctantly, shifting nervously as all eyes focused on him. “Maester Aemon thinks there is another reason why Jon isn’t growing like most boys do… You’re right it has to do with his other family, but not in the way you think.”

Oberyn flashed back to the suspicion he had had of Jon’s true nature upon meeting the boy and realizing his parentage. If it was as he thought, this could prove very interesting for the future. However, he decided to let Benjen be the one to drop this little tidbit of wildfire.

“Well?” Stark was eying his brother impatiently, but also with a healthy dose of dread.

“Maester Aemon thinks Jon is a bearer.”

Oh yes, Oberyn thought as he watched Lord Stark gap in shock. This would bring about many interesting things in the future.
Jon panted heavily trying to gain his breath back. The remains of the Walker melted into the stone floor, leaving him more than a little bewildered. While he had killed before, never had a body simply exploded like that.

A small whimper of pain drew his attention and soon he was making his way to Ghost. The pup, that had grown bigger since he’d last seen him in his dream, was favoring his right side, where he’d struck the wall.

“Are you okay boy,” Jon whispered as he gently examined his companion.

The red eyes locked on his and a small tongue managed to lick his nose to show the wolf was indeed doing better.

“How did you even get here,” Jon wondered, eyes scanning the room again. They lingered on the tree and for a moment he swore he could hear the voices of his siblings, but surely he was mistaken. The tree itself had stopped glowing, the eyes of the faces returning to their normal positions. It was then he remembered Seed.

“Seed,” he called, hurrying over to the fallen form of the ancient Child.

Turning her over gently, he hissed at the sight of the blue blood seeping through the giant wound in her abdomen. Even though frost crystals kissed the edges of it, the blood flow was not stemmed in the least.

“Seed?” This time her eyes flickered slightly, but it was not encouraging. Jon knew this was not a wound one walked away from, especially without a healer on hand.

“Go,” she rasped, her lips painted blue with her own blood. “You… have… much… to… do…”

“Surely there’s something I can do now, for you,” he cajoled, even though he knew his words were wind.

“So…kind,” she huffed out, barely audible. Her aged eyes found his, before flickering to the Direwolf pup next to him. “You…have… found… your… ice… Now… you… must… find… your… fire…”

“My fire? I don’t understand… Seed,” he called out in a panic as her eyes closed once more and her body sagged against his. “Seed!”

However, it was futile. Her tiny chest gave one last movement, before stilling forever. Slowly, gently he picked her up before laying her in the center roots of the giant Heart tree. He silently said a prayer for her to the old gods, hoping they would carry her soul to be with her people in the afterlife.

Once he was done he found the scabbard for his new sword and sheathed it, tying it to his belt. When he found his pack he motioned Ghost forward, pulling out a few bandages to help secure his front leg, which seemed to have taken the brunt of the hit. Once the wolf was taken care of he stood, looking for a way out of the giant cavern.

“Well… don’t suppose you know the way out,” he asked Ghost, only to get a blank look in return. “No I didn’t think so. I certainly don’t know what Seed was speaking about either, finding my ‘fire’. Why can no one speak plainly?” Shouldering his pack he glanced at his new traveling companion.
Well we should get go…"

A loud rumbling echoed through the chamber, followed shortly by the earth shaking. Rocks from the ceiling began to dislodge and Jon swept Ghost into his arms to keep the pup safe. A strange feeling of weightlessness overtook him, his stomach flipping at the sensation before he was falling. The air whipped past him as he curled even tighter around his companion, hoping to protect them both from the rocks falling with them. His side collided with a hard surface, though in his mind he registered it was not nearly as hard as rock. It slowed his descent somewhat and sent him into another section of the wall. He rolled slightly, the wall not as jagged as he was expecting, and what he thought might be large roots jutted out catching him time and again slowing him further. Ghost remained quiet the entire time, though Jon could feel his friend shaking. Granted it could have been him shaking as well. Finally they made it to the bottom of the deep cavern, one final strike leaving Jon sore and more than a bit breathless. He managed to roll to his side to keep from smothering Ghost, as well as allow him to dodge some of the still falling rocks.

After several long minutes the lower cavern grew quiet, all of the rocks and debris settling. Blinking away the dust still lingering in the air he slowly looked around trying to get a sense of their direction. Aside from the light gleaming down from their previous destination the area was dark, cold and musty. There was staleness to the air indicating nothing had been in this portion of the caverns in sometime. Under that he detected a slightly fouler stench, much like the time Theon and Robb had put rotten eggs in his bedding.

Carefully he started to uncurl, trying hard not to wince at the bruises making themselves known to him. Ghost managed to wiggle free, coming to his feet gingerly, sniffing the air only to sneeze at the new smells.

“You okay boy,” Jon asked again, gently rubbing the pup between his ears. Ghost responded with a small lick to his nose, causing Jon to balk slightly at the wet feeling.

Pushing up to his feet he took stock of his injuries, finding mostly bruises and thankfully no broken bones or serious lacerations. Looking up he found that the long tunnel leading up to where they had been before was covered in the roots of the Weir tree, showing just how deep they went. He marveled at the distance, thinking how lucky they had been not to die from the drop.

A sharp low bark had him snapping his gaze to his pup; surprised he even made such a sound. If not for his bright white fur, as covered in dust as it was, Jon might not have seen the pup in the darkness. Next to him he could make out a large lump. Moving over he found his bag and the sword Jon had used against the Walker earlier.

‘Lucky indeed,’ he thought suspiciously. ‘Or perhaps it’s not luck at all…’

Rummaging through the pack he found the bag of dried fruits the old woman had given him and managed to eat one, before tempting Ghost to eating his own. The look the small wolf threw him clearly indicated he disagreed with the taste, but he ate it none-the-less.

Taking his old scabbard he fashioned a small torch with an old shirt, allowing them a bit more light. The walls now gleamed and glistened against the blackened stone that shone unlike any stone Jon had seen before. An array of colors shimmered throughout in a beautiful display of nature. He ran his fingers against one wall, pulling back as the edges bit sharply at his exposed skin. Thin ribbons of blood welled up, but nothing serious.

Another bark from Ghost cut into his thoughts. He found the wolf pup standing at what looked like the beginning of a large tunnel. Considering they had no other way to go, unless they wanted to try to climb up, Jon decided to follow his companion’s advice. Shouldering his pack and securing his
new sword to his side he waved the pup on, hoping beyond hope this would lead to the way out.
It was hard to tell time down in the caverns as no light except what Jon could keep burning pierced the darkness. What he could see showed a large spiraled tunnel, the rock sometimes melted in such a way that it seemed more like glass or folded cloth than rock. He barely remembered Maester Luwin mentioning how lava could form such, but he’d never seen anything to indicate it. Truly it spoke to the immense power of nature.

Nothing else seemed to exist in the caves, not even insects. Then again the constant smell of foul eggs hinted to the reason. Jon guessed it had to do with gases, but again Maester Luwin had not focused on those in his lessons, so it was a vague memory. He did notice that he had no problem with breathing, while Ghost occasionally seemed to need to steer clear of certain areas. So he chose to let his four-legged friend lead them. Perhaps it was his Targaryen heritage shining through. Some of them could even stand in fire without being burned, so it seemed logical that he could handle residual gasses from burning rock. However, he also knew that while he might have some immunity to fire, it was very unlikely he would have the same to lava. He doubted anyone could.

In fact he was starting to think the Doom of Valyria might not have been some magical curse, but mother nature’s work. He’d seen her power in the North, it made sense she could wield it here so far south.

After what seemed like forever he and Ghost came upon a cross roads of sort. The tunnel they had been traversing for the past several hours opened into a large circular cavern, with several tunnels breaking off from it in nearly ever direction. The main difference he could see though was that this area had hints of man’s influence.

He could see where parts of the walls had been chiseled away instead of merely broken naturally. Moving closer to that section he almost dropped his torch when he noted the statues embedded within the walls. It looks like large legs and clawed feet. Gulping he looked up to see these were indeed part of larger dragon statues that stood to the top of the cavern ceiling. He turned to find Ghost sniffing suspiciously at one of the statue’s feet, hoping the wolf did not choose to relieve himself on one. He felt strange looking at them. They seemed so lifelike, almost as if he was staring at Balerion, or one of his siblings. He’d never seen such detail in a stone carving, especially one so clearly aged. It was more like the lava had covered the dragons, trapping them…

Maybe it had?

If so this was a graveyard. He felt a pang in his heart at the thought. Though dragons frightened him with their size and power he still felt sad at the thought of them dying in such a way. It would be like Ghost and his pack being frozen for all time by the harsh ice of the north.

He moved forward to the closest one, placing his hand on it’s giant clawed foot, so small compared to the behemoth.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, though it seemed as if he had yelled it given how it echoed within the chamber.

After a long moment of solemn silence he turned to Ghost. “Let’s get out of here boy. There must be a tunnel leading to the outside from here.”

As he turned to follow Ghost’s movement that same feeling he had telling him he was needed somewhere tugged sharply at his gut. He froze, eyes wide. Never had the pull happened so suddenly
or so strongly. His grey eyes swept the area until his eyes locked on one of the smaller tunnels, this one guarded by two of the giant dragons.

Without thought his feet pulled him to the entrance where he stood for several heartbeats trying to control the feelings sweeping through him. It was only Ghost nudging his side that broke him from the strange trance.

“Something is calling me down there, Ghost,” he explained, moving to squat before his furred companion. “I need to see what it is. But I do not think you can come with me.” The wolf keened sadly, licking his pack-brother’s face. “I need you to stay here and watch out things. I will return as soon as I can.” Once more Ghost licked his face, this time with a sense of understanding.

The more Jon was around his friend the more he was certain the wolf held a far greater intelligence than normal animals. Ruffling his furred head, he moved to place his pack down by his companion.

Taking a deep breath he gathered his courage and took the first step into the tunnel. It was barely large enough for one of the dragons to move through, unlike the other tunnels, which seemed twice the size. All along the walls Jon could make out claw and scorch marks. The air was also far more oppressive in this section, the smell of gasses much harsher. The further he went the hotter it grew, as well. He could feel sweat coating his skin, but it didn’t do more than make him slightly uncomfortable.

The tunnel wound down into the earth, twisting in strange patterns. Still he pushed on, the pull growing with each step he took. Here the rocks held far more obsidian, the edges sharp and jagged threatening to impale him if he made one wrong move.

Soon a strange light started to dance around the edges of the tunnel, mimicking fire. By now the heat was so strong he thought for sure he would melt. Yet, it did not bother him the way the heat of the desert had when he first came to Essos. Though he was covered in a layer of sweat, the heat felt more like a welcoming embrace than a threat.

With one last turn he reached his destination. The tunnel opened into a large cavern, filled with nooks and crannies where he could imagine dragons curling up for naps. However it was the middle of the room that truly impressed him.

A large pool of lava bubbled and flowed around a single island of pure obsidian. Within the rocky crags sat several rounded rocks, only Jon knew they were not actual rocks, but dragon eggs. All of them were nestled in the sharp embrace of the obsidian, the heat rising from the glowing lava keeping them perfectly warm.

Jon could not help but stare at this amazing vision. No one had ever heard anything about how the Valyrians hatched dragons, at least no one alive. The Targaryens had taken their eggs away long before the Doom, chosen different methods for incubation, at least from what Rhaenys had told him. This though looked like a picture from a storybook of legends. Which, he supposed it really was. For Valyria had become nothing but legends now.

The pull tugged at him again, this time he could tell exactly from where. His eyes landed on one of the eggs, its shells a deep blue with threads of white and silver dancing through it. Surely this could not be real?

‘You have your ice, now you must find your fire.’

Is that not what Seed said? Did she mean a dragon? An actual living dragon? How in the seven hells was he supposed to hatch it? And even if he did how was he supposed to care for it?
Ghost was easy; he was a predator, albeit one thought extinct, that he knew how to deal with because of the wolves roaming the north. But a dragon? There had not been a living dragon in over a hundred and fifty years!

The pull continued to harass him until he finally moved once more. When he reached the edge of the lava lake he paused. How was he supposed to get across that? Without killing himself in the process?

Looking around he for some sign he spotted a small rock bridge on the other side. It was barely a foot in width, arched dangerously over the lava. Well, he had asked for a way hadn’t he?

Mustering up his courage he moved to the bridge, carefully placing his foot. His stomach flipped when the rocks skid slightly making it harder for his foot to find purchase. Either time had caused this, or it was some sort of test, for those who wanted to hatch a dragon, to prove themselves worthy or die trying.

Yet, did he really need to do this? His purpose was to defeat the Night King, save the north, the realm and his family. Of course, a dragon would help with that greatly. His instincts had not proven him wrong before now, so surely this was meant to be?

Fortifying himself he pushed off the solid ground to stand fully on the bridge. He sent a prayer to the gods that he was not making a huge mistake. Focusing on the island and his egg in particular Jon slowly made his way across the bridge, trying to ignore the way the lava below bubbled and popped. Finally after several heart stopping moment his feet touched down on the small island holding the eggs.

Letting out a shaky breath he moved to his egg, the one he knew was calling him. Crouching down he slipped his hands around the rocklike form, feeling a pulse of life spread through him. It was a connection similar to the one he’d felt with Ghost. A sense of rightness that helped to settle his soul.

“Hello,” he whispered softly. “I believe you’ve been waiting for me?”

Again he felt a pulse coming from the egg, like an affirmation. Some how, he was unsure exactly how, he knew that he needed the hatch the egg now. It was warm, warmer than the other eggs around it seemed. So how…

“Fire and blood,” he murmured the words of his house. Most thought, himself included, that they indicated how their house would bring their fury in battle. Yet, perhaps it was more than that. Did not Ser Oz tell him that words can have more than one meaning?

“Well, we certainly have the fire,” he remarked dryly, glancing at the ever-churning lava, flames dancing along the surface. “So it is blood we need…”

Thoughtfully he ran his fingers over the sharp obsidian his egg was nestled in, the edges biting into his skin, as easily as a sharp knife. His blood welled to the surface. With an almost reverent touch he ran his bloody fingers over the scaled surface of the egg, watching in fascination as the blood soaked into the egg. Just as he wondered how much was needed the egg twitched.

Jon pulled back in surprise, watching as the small egg rocked back and forth, the sides pushing out in random places as the creature inside moved for the first time. He could only stare in wonder as the first crack formed, a small snout breaking it open further. The sides of the egg seemed to expand like something was pushing on them. Then, almost at once the eggshell exploded out to reveal the small serpent form of his dragon. The little thing skittered on the rocks, trying to balance itself as it flared its small delicate wings. Jon instantly moved to help the small dragon, his hands carefully holding the sides to not damage it. Much like Ghost, his dragon had deep reddish eyes, which blinked up at him.
curiously.

“Hello, I’m Jon,” he introduced himself, rubbing the tiny scales softly.

The dragon chirped and warbled at him, making Jon chuckle. He took in the deep blues of the scales, interspersed with whites and lighter blues. It reminded him greatly of the sky back home in the North, just before a storm came.


The small dragon seemed to dance around in his hold, hopefully in approval of his new name. Jon grinned happily, picking the small dragon up carefully and placing him on his shoulder after Jedar tried to climb up his forearm. The dragon crooned in approval, the small talons on his back legs digging into Jon’s clothes to gain purchase.

“Well I supposed we should head back,” Jon announced. “I think Ghost would like to meet his new pack mate…”

Just as he was about to turn he noticed the egg that had been right next to Jedar’s. It was a deep black with bright orange, red and gold decorating the scales. While it did not have nearly the same pull that Jedar did, he knew this egg was important too. Kneeling down he looked it over, not feeling the same warmth he had felt when he’d touched Jedar’s egg. Yet there was a connection, almost like it was related…

“Aegon,” Jon blurted in realization. “This one belongs to Aegon.” Glancing at Jedar he cocked his head. “I suppose we should take this one with us?”

Jedar only hummed in what seemed like agreement, so Jon gently picked up the egg, pausing for a moment hoping that nothing happened to show disapproval for his move. When he remained breathing and un-smote, he figured his assumption was correct. Gathering the still egg into his arms he turned to make his way back.

Heading back to the main room where Ghost waited was a bit more difficult as they were now traveling uphill. It also felt longer as Jon didn’t have the constant pull at his gut to lead him onward. On the way Jegar had grown tired of sitting on his shoulder and climbed onto his head, making a nest in his hair and falling asleep. Jon was not amused but couldn’t do much about it at the moment. He did resolve to try and make sure this did not become a habit for the small dragon. It had taken forever for his hair to grown back after his shipmates had shaved it, he didn’t need his new companion pulling it out in his quest to make a bed.

After what again seemed like countless hours Jon stumbled into the main chamber. Ghost was up and greeting him enthusiastically, nearly prancing around the boy to show his happiness at his return. Jon greeting him as well, placing the egg down and scratching Ghost in all his favorite places.

“Ghost, this is Jegar,” he introduced the now awake dragon. “Jegar, this is Ghost. You are both a part of me, that makes us all pack,” he explained seriously. “So I expect you two to get along. Understand?”

The two creatures merely blinked at him before deciding to inspect one another, ignoring their human for the time being. A lot of sniffing occurred and one lick from Ghost, which had Jegar screeching in protest, but the two seemed to accept one another.

“We’ll stay here for the night before moving on,” he told the two, settling down by his pack to rest.
“Tomorrow we can find our way out.”
chapter 39 Jon

“Alright you two enough,” Jon huffed for what felt like the hundredth time. Honestly he felt like he was mediating between Arya and Bran at their worst. Were all young siblings like this? He didn’t remember acting this way with Robb or Sansa… not that he would have been able to but still.

Ghost and Jedar though had apparently grown bored in their wanderings and decided messing with each other was a perfectly acceptable way to pass the time. Jon might not have cared except more often than not they ended up putting him in the middle, literally! He had ended up on the floor so often his bruised had bruises! Sure they’d behave when he snapped at them, for five minutes at most, then they’d go back to baiting each other! By the gods if they did not stop he would put them in time out! He didn’t care if he had to stop for the day to make sure they both followed the punishment, they were going to learn to listen to him damn it!

Ok, so they had been walking for a long time after picking the tunnel that seemed the best bet to get them out, and there had been a lot of stairs going up. So in a way Jon understands their need to express their frustration, but he was frustrated too and it wasn’t doing them any good to fight with each other. At least they were seeing more signs of civilization, or what was left of it in any case. The cavern walls had smoothed out and one could see where bracers had been placed for lighting. The stairs were a huge improvement to the uneven rocky terrain, even if his legs burned from the exertion of climbing them. They might have ended sooner, but the area where doors had been were all closed off from cave ins, so they were stuck continuing on the longer route. He supposed one small grace was that his two unruly companions never chose to trip him on the actual stairway, instead picking the larger landings so he wouldn’t tumble back the way he came. It proved marginally less painful that way.

Still he couldn’t help but wonder if they had chosen the wrong tunnel to go through. It had seemed the best at first, but now he wondered. Surely there was a tunnel the dragons had used to get out that was much quicker than this? They certainly didn’t come this way unless they were young, because the tunnel became smaller so that only men could pass through it. He supposed it was progress as they were clearly going somewhere men would go.

It was quiet for all of ten minutes this time, before Jegar chose to try his hand at gliding again, since flying was still beyond him, and landed on Ghost’s head. Off they went, tumbling around and snapping at each other. Sighing heavily and asking the gods for patience, Jon moved to separate them, only this time they were rolling a bit too forcefully and they knocked into Jon throwing him to the side and into the wall. Or they would have, if the wall hadn’t been a hidden door. His weight must have been enough to force the partially open doorway the rest of the way, sending the trio tumbling into the room beyond.

Jon untangled from his companions growling in irritation at them, noting they wisely backed away realizing they had fully angered him. Amazing how well behaved they were now.

Huffing he glanced around the room trying to see where they had ended up. The torch he had been carrying was beginning to burn out on the floor by the doorway. It would not be much longer before they were in total darkness. Just as he moved to grab the dying torch more torches in the room lit in a display of magic. Jon jumped into a defensive position, making sure to put Ghost and Jedar behind him, his sword now at the ready.

The firelight gleamed off of several swords, spears and shields. Jon just stared in amazement at the sheer amount of weapons the room held. Clearly this was an armory of some sort, an armory of Valyrian steel from the way the metal looked. Never had he seen so much of this valued metal. Sure
his new sword was Valyrian steel, though the metal was darker than he expected, but to see so much. The only other weapon he’d seen of its like was Ice, his father’s sword, the ancestral sword of the Starks. Valyrian steel was near impossible to come by now, and those houses that held a sword made from it guarded them viciously. They were also worth a fortune. If he took even a handful of these weapons he could ransom the entire seven kingdoms for them.

Not that he would. No he had better uses for these weapons. Afterall, didn’t his new sword kill the walker? Where his normal iron sword had been shattered to pieces the Valyrian steel had not only held against the Walker, but shattered it in turn. So it only made sense that these weapons would also be able to hold against the Others. This meant he needed to take as many of these as he could to ship to the Watch. As the first line of defense they would need the weapons to fight the true enemy.

Now he just had to figure out how to get them where he needed them…

“But we have to get out first,” Jon mumbled tiredly, eyes sweeping the room, this time for exits. Turning to his two companions who looked the very picture of perfectly behaved, not that he believed it for a second, he issued his orders. “Split up and see if you can find any doors leading out, preferably not the one we crashed through.”

Ghost yipped in agreement, moving off immediately nose to the ground in his search. Jedar purred happily before he too skittered off in a slightly different direction, his long tail swinging back and forth in excitement. Jon eyed them for a moment to make sure they didn’t get distracted before pursuing his own search.

While doing so he took a mental inventory of everything he saw. Luckily many of the weapons were sorted properly and even sat in boxes for transport. A lot were in fact, which made him wonder if someone had been planning to move the weapons elsewhere. He knew it wasn’t recently; the dust was too thick for that. Had the main inhabitants been planning on relocating like the Targaryens but been caught by the Doom instead? Daenys had mentioned she was not the only one who ‘saw’ the Doom coming, however their family was the first to actually heed the vision.

Strangely he had yet to encounter a body, a human one at least. There had been thousands living on these islands, surely something would be left of them. Shaking the dark thought away he continued his search for a door, going so far as to run his fingers over the stone wall for any possible hidden passages. Winterfell had been full of them, much to the delight of his younger siblings. It did not seem so farfetched that a strong hold such as this would have a few.

Jedar’s loud squawking grabbed his attention. He found the little dragon across the room nearly dancing in place to alert them of his find. Ghost and Jon joined soon after, the former looking a bit put out at the dragon finding the doorway first. Jon carefully bit back any amusement at the sight.

“Good work,” he praised calmly, ignoring the way the little dragon puffed up smugly. He examined the door, especially the lock. It appeared to be the main entryway, and he knew from experience such places were not guarded lightly.

The lock mechanism he could see from this side of the door had four giant metal bars, attached to levers attached to some sort of gear system. No doubt the key would force the gears to move, thus pulling the bars from the holes situated in the wall allowing the door to open outward. Each bar looked to be forged in Valyrian steel as well, meaning no one would have been able to break the door open in either direction.

After a long moment of studying the lock system Jon came up with a plan. Moving back into the room he found a long spear the metal top long enough for what he wanted to do. Jamming the metal portion into the lowest gear, he pushed and pulled in a motion to force the gear to move clockwise.
For a second he thought it would not work, the gear refusing to budge despite showing no rust. However, one more hard push seemed to be enough to force the gear into motion, slow though it was, a loud screech echoing in the chamber as the metal bar finally moved from its resting place for the first time in centuries.

Jon felt his muscles burning as he continued to force the gear to move until at last the bar slid into place with a sharp thud. Panting at the exertion he looked down to his two companions, both laying pitifully on the floor, their forearms covering their ears as best they could.

“One down, three to go.”

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Jon sighed in pleasure as the first hint of a breeze brushed against his sweaty skin. It had taken hours to get out of the armory and another just to get up to this level. The tunnel they had found led directly to what he assumed had been a barracks, from what little was left. Most of the building was gone, or crumbled around them. No cloth or furniture remained, and again he found no bodies. All that remained were stone walls and a few pieces of metal here and there. He had not felt so perturbed since he’d been in the Stark Crypts.

Ghost had already started sniffing around, far happier to be out of the tunnels. Jedar seemed curious but chose to stay on Jon’s shoulder, not caring for the sunlight that streamed in, as little of it as there was.

Moving to the opened wall he gazed out over what was left of the city. For miles he could see the remnants of what had once been buildings, though most were barely standing and others only guessed at from the outlines in the dirt. In some sections of what clearly was a sprawling metropolis, nothing but dirt and rock remained, as if the island had simply absorbed the buildings back into itself. Like with the forested section, little to no animals existed. Indeed Jon felt it was even quieter here than back in the forest.

Sweeping his eyes over the city again to search for anything that might help, he paused when he saw what looked like a shipyard. It was a good distance from his current location, yet close enough that an army outfitting ships would have little time in doing so. It made sense to have it located in such a place.

“Best see if we can even find a ship that can carry what we found, or there’s no point bringing it up,” Jon informed his companions, hitching his bag a little higher, despite Jedar’s protest. “Let’s go.”

The small group picked their way down to the dock area. The closer they got, the easier it was for Jon to pick out what looked like wreckage, the small bits above the water in any case. He huffed in irritation to see what boats had once sat in the dock were sunk to the ocean floor, most of the wood rotten from centuries underwater. He continued searching for anything that might help, moving to a section of walls that seemed to have withstood the Doom. Perhaps there were some smaller boats within, or partially completed boats? Zee and the others had taught him how to repair smaller boats and some larger ones, theoretically. It might take time but surely he could manage something to at least take him to the other side of the island to get his original boat.

Suddenly a feeling of foreboding came over him and the hairs on his neck stood up. Ghost, turned sharply and began to growl, while Jedar turned on his shoulder hissing in warning. A long shadow hovered over Jon’s form as he turned to face this new threat, his hand reaching for his sword.
Ned breathed deeply as he ran a cloth over Ice. He was nestled in the roots of the Heart tree trying to find a moment of peace. It seemed since Jon’s revelation of the true enemy beyond the Wall life had been busier than ever. After Oberyn’s visit and the vision many had seen from the Heart Tree of Jon battling one of the enemy it got even busier. Especially as nearly every lord and/or lady in the north had seen the vision in the Heart Trees residing in the Gods woods in their own Keeps. No longer were they questioning him about his sanity for allowing the Free Folk south of the Wall.

Apparently some of them had seen the vision too, according to Benjen’s latest report. Mance Rayder had been working with the Night’s Watch to get the rest of the clans moved south, the heads of the Clans meeting with Lord Commander Mormont and his higher ranking men when it occurred. Even the southern naysayers, like Thorne, couldn’t deny what they had seen. However, the fact Jon was able to kill one of the Walkers had given them all hope.

The poor boy would not know just how his reputation had grown in the North. His name was whispered with reverence among the Free Folk and many of the Northern houses. He was the first to kill a Walker in thousands of years, he was the one to warn the Warden of the North of the danger bringing about the alliance with the Free Folk which in turn lead to reinforcing the Wall, and he was not even in the north for any of this. That probably more than anything impressed the people. A boy who had been raised a bastard, noble or not, who had run away from horrible treatment and had every right to ignore his homeland, chose to put the needs of the people first instead of leaving them to a grim fate.

It made Ned extremely proud and humble in turns.

Now if only he could ignore the ridiculous marriage proposals for the boy. Despite the fact he wasn’t even in the North any longer, his lords now thought having him betrothed to a northern girl, and in some cases a boy, would be for the best. Benjen had even hinted he’d heard some mutterings among the Free Folk about stealing the boy, their version of marriage. As if he didn’t have enough headaches with people sniffing out his trueborn children’s hands in marriage. He had always hoped Jon at least would be able to choose who he married, if he married at all.

However, with the revelation that Jon may be a carrier, a male able to bear children for another male, a very rare and highly prized ability, Ned knew his headaches would only get worse if more found out about it. If someone found out, who’s to say they wouldn’t force the boy into a marriage, or some kind of servitude. Many saw a carrier as a prize to possess, like some novelty as it was no secret that they only appeared in lines with strong Valyrian blood. Many had appeared in the Targaryen line, and always they were claimed by their own to keep others from gaining such a jewel.

Huffing he shook off these thoughts, trying to focus on things he could actually affect. Like the current settlement of the Gift and New Gift. The Free Folk seemed to be cooperating very well. There were still some skirmishes, the old wounds would never fully heal on either side. Yet, for the most part everyone seemed willing to work through it. The clan heads under Mance especially worked to keep the peace, knowing how precious this chance was. Many of the lords and small folk had not liked his plan at first, but after the vision from the Heart Trees all over the north…

No, they all knew their best chance to survive was in numbers. Even if those numbers contained once enemies.

Though he had to admit many people were having near fits over the existence of giants and mammoths. Luwin and several other Maesters were near frothing at the mouth to study the large
The soft steps of his lady wife broke his musings. He glanced her way taking note of the guarded look on her face and the scroll in her hand.

“So who is coming to call now,” he asked sullenly.

“What makes you think someone is requesting a visit,” she asked, a spark of amusement in her eyes.

“Because recently it has become habit for you to break the news of incoming visitors while I am enjoying the peace of the Godswood,” he accused playfully. “I think you do so to avoid me throwing a fit.”

“As if you throw fits, Ned,” she chided wryly. Suddenly her face turned a bit more serious. “While it is indeed a notice of a visit, it also holds more dire news.”

Ned straightened focusing his attention on her. “What is it?”

“Lord Arryn has died,” she informed him as gently as possible.

Ned felt like someone had taken Robert’s Warhammer and slammed it into his chest. “What? That’s not possible… Does it say how?”

“King Robert mentioned he took ill suddenly and passed from a fever,” she relayed the information, passing the scroll to Ned. “He was an older man, even if he enjoyed good health for some time. I am sorry Ned.”

He sighed sadly as he thought of the man he had been fostered too all those years ago. Jon Arryn had been much like a father to Ned, especially after his own father had been unjustly murdered by the crown. Reading Robert’s note further he couldn’t contain the minor groan when it plainly stated his old friend was coming north to see him.

“It looks like we must prepare for a royal visit,” he grumbled. “And he’s bringing near the whole court.”

“Do you think he means to ask you to be his Hand,” Cat queried.

“Possibly,” he muttered then snorted. “Probably. Robert always did want me by his side when we were younger. But with all that is happening in the North I do not think this would be a good time for me to go. We have no idea when the true enemy will strike, and there is much to do to prepare for winter.”

“He could also be coming to get more information about the changes we have been making,” she suggested. “Rumors have a way of drifting south, even if we do not want them to. Most will be surprised by the changes that have occurred in the ‘savage’ north.”

He scoffed at her choice of words, but could not refute them. Many in the south did look upon the north as a vast wasteland run by uncouth savages. He’d like to introduce most of them to the Free Folk, Rattleshirt and the Thennes in particular. Some of them might actually learn the true meaning of the word, though he doubted it given how foolish most southern nobles were. Still, he had no illusions that even Robert would be shocked at the changes Ned had implemented. The roads were far better than before, most of Winterfell and many other Keeps had been restored in ways that clearly showed the occupants expected battle in some form. While Robert may not like politics in general, he would easily spot the militaristic changes. A big glaring change would be the restoration of Moat Cailin. The old fortress, desolate for near two centuries, now stood as strong as when it had
first been built. In fact he planned to give it to one of his sons in the future.

“He also has a son near of age with Sansa,” she continued on, trying not to laugh at the grimace on Ned’s face. “He has always wanted the Baratheons and Starks to be united by marriage. Perhaps he will suggest a betrothal.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Ned grumbled. “All anyone wants to do now is marry one of my children! None of which are of age!”

Cat chuckled lightly. “They do not have to get married yet. A betrothal can be for many years.”

“Humph,” Ned snorted. “The boy will have to prove himself before I allow any such alignments, even if he is Robert’s son. You know as well as I sons can be vastly different from their fathers. I’ll not have a boy I hardly know wed our daughter.”

“It would be a good match, and Sansa would be queen,” she reminded him gently.

“Aye, in theory, but I would like to be sure before giving my daughter away,” he stated plainly. “I’ll not repeat mistakes of the past. First and foremost I will make sure my children are happy with their matches.”

“That is a good sentiment Ned, but not always an applicable one,” she cautioned.

He didn’t say anything to that as he knew very well it might not work the way he wants, but he would try his best to make sure his children approved of any matches for their hands. While he had come to love Cat, he was well aware that many did not put the same effort into their marriages as they had. Even with said effort they had problems, some harder to overcome than others.

Instead he slowly rose to his feet, holding his arm out for his wife. “I suppose we should gather Poole, Luwin and Roderick to prepare the Keep. Gods know the numpties from the court will expect certain frivolities.”

“Ned,” Cat chided lightly, though she did not disagree. While his wife may be southern she had never had a preference for over-extravagance that many in the southern courts had.

“Maybe we should invite some of the Free Folk…”

“Now you’re just being mean, husband,” she warned. “There’s no need to torture the Free Folk in such a way.”

Ned’s laughter reverberated through the Godswood as they continued to the main Keep.
Arya hated Kings Landing. Well no, she didn’t hate the city itself. She actually had a grand time in the city, with other children her age, mostly the orphans. It was the Red Keep she loathed with a vengeance. Everywhere she turned there were southern knights, southern lords and southern ladies and not a single one ever spoke plainly or even true. There were so many lies uttered in the air she wondered if the people speaking them even knew the difference anymore.

If only King Robert hadn’t come to Winterfell. If only her father hadn’t been forced to accept the position as his Hand. She knew he had tried to get out of it, but King Robert wouldn’t accept no. The selfish bastard.

Thank the gods father had been able to deny him a betrothal between Sansa and the Crown Prince Joffery. Never had she met a more odious boy. No doubt Sansa of old would have fallen all over herself trying to please him, but the Sansa of now was far more cautious of new people and took time to get to know them. Even she, with her kind nature and never ending manners, couldn’t find any good aspects of the prince. He was rude, spoiled and only acted ‘princely’ when social necessity dictated it. The way he treated his guards, the Hound in particular, bothered both sisters greatly. The two often shared their thoughts in the dark hours of the night when they should be abed. It was the only true way to keep others from over hearing them.

At least their father was being honest with them and not keeping them in the dark, as he normally would have. However, both girl had confronted him in his solar late one evening of the first week, making sure only Jory stood outside the door. The both explained their observations of the people in the Keep and what they had seen on the road. Their father had no choice but to see that the girls were not blind to the true natures of the people here in the capitol. It was Sansa who had the best argument.

“How can we protect our selves and each other if we do not share what we know,” she’d asked pertly. “Already I have seen the way these Lords and Ladies use knowledge against one another, and I for one do not want us to be on the ignorant side.”

He had stared at them long and hard, like he did when he was trying to determine just how invested they were in whatever mischief they came up with. Yet neither girl would be dissuaded and in a surprising show of unity they withstood their father’s hard stare, until he finally huffed a small laugh his grey eyes shining with pride.

“Aye, you are right,” he admitted ruefully. “The lone wolf dies but the pack survives. What I am about to tell you goes no further than this room. Make sure to keep your guards up and do not trust anyone but our sworn guards and each other. Understood?”

He had explained about the letter from Aunt Lysa about the Lannister plot to kill Jon Arryn, and the strange investigation the man had been doing prior to his death. He indicated that he was following up on this same investigation, which could be very dangerous. At the same time he was aware the Queen and the King were trying to maneuver Sansa to being Joffery’s wife, though he suspected very different reasoning on the Queen’s behalf. He mentioned his own observations about the boy, which both girls backed immediately. Arya had flat out told their father she refused to let Sansa marry such a man, as he would no doubt treat her cruelly behind doors while playing the generous prince to everyone else.

“Jon told us to look out for Sansa, it’s our job to make sure she marries a good man,” Arya had stated sternly, ignoring Sansa’s slightly startled look. “Joffery is not a good man, nor is he showing the
ability to turn into one.”

Granted when her sister went to hug her she pushed her away. Couldn’t have the other girl thinking she was going soft. Her father’s proud smile didn’t help either. Really they were SO embarrassing!

Of course his way of rewarding her was allowing her ‘dancing’ lessons with Syrio Foil, so she would just call it a win.

In fact it was decided the best way to keep the girls safe was to have them too busy to fall into the grips of these snakes in silk. He had Arya’s ‘dancing’ lessons set up, though she was still to continue with her other feminine lessons, however he also allowed her to pick a few other things to learn, like languages. Sansa he also had continue her lessons, but he asked her to start others she might be interested in or to find some charity group to spend time with. She of course naturally gravitated towards helping at the local orphanages. She had enjoyed it greatly in Wintertown and wanted to see if she could help here as well. So at least twice a week she went down to main city, spending time helping the Matrons at the orphanage with the children. At first they thought Sansa just wanted to show how ‘pious’ she was, but when her older sister jumped in to help, no matter how dirty the task, they warmed up to her quickly. Arya joined her most of the time, to protect her of course. If she got to play with some of the older children and keep them busy for the matrons who was going to complain?

Still it bothered her how much had changed in such a short time.

First they had to endure the royal family showing up, making such a fuss all through the Keep. Everyone was running around, things getting cleaned and prepared. Her mother had made Sansa and her follow her around to show them how to prepare for such high status guests. Arya didn’t really see much difference, but did as her mother asked. She did learn a bit more on how to deal with higher ranking women coming into one’s home and how to handle them without insult yet also without showing weakness, so she supposed that was alright. Plus some of the Kingsguard were coming so that would be interesting. Or it would have been; for all the pomp and shine of the knights, they really weren’t that impressive. Granted Ser Barristan had not been there, but the others were nowhere near the standards of the great Ser Arthur or Ser Hightower were said to be. The Kingslayer was grand at first, but he was just so arrogant it was hard to like him. Maybe it was a Lannister trait?

Regardless, the additional people in the Keep made things annoying in her opinion. Sure it was grand at first, but after a while she could understand why having a group of over a hundred people descending upon one’s home to be more of a pain than a pleasure. That Joffery kept following Sansa around trying to impress her only made him seem more stupid. Marcella and Tommen were okay, though far more timid than their older brother. The rest of the members of the party weren’t very impressive and the King was downright disappointing. How could that fat drunken man be the Demon of the Trident their father spoke about? More embarrassing was the way he treated the serving women around the Keep, right in front of his wife no less.

No, Arya had not enjoyed the Royal visit. She’d been even more annoyed to find out King Robert had basically forced her father to accepting the position as his Hand. Apparently since he refused to betroth Sansa to his son, Robert thought her father owed it to him to come south. Didn’t the big lout know the North needed her father to stay and help them prepare for whatever was coming?

Neither she nor any of her siblings were stupid, despite what she might call them. They could tell things were changing. First with Father’s visit to the Wall, then the Wildlings, or Free Folk as they preferred, were being let past the Wall to settle the Gift and the New Gift. Some were even helping to man the Wall. Then there was the sudden upswing of training for the guards. None of them had
put the full picture together though until the incident in the Godswood where they saw Jon fighting the strange creature.

Their parents tried to brush it off, telling them they were handling it, but none of them would let it go. That creature had been right out of one of old Nan’s stories. Clearly it was a White Walker, an enemy thought long gone that dwelled beyond the Wall. Granted that brought to question how Jon was fighting one when he was supposed to be in Essos, unless he somehow managed to travel to the far north. It was hard to tell as they had not received any further letters to date.

She could admit the biggest argument she had against coming south was Jon would not know to send them letters here. She missed her big brother, the only other one of their family that shared her dark looks. While her relationship with Sansa and Robb had improved vastly over the years, it was still Jon she first thought to look for whenever she was sad or scared. Many times she had wished he had not left, if only so she could have him around to wrap her in his arms and tell her all would be well. She knew it was selfish, but she couldn’t help it. A part of her held some anger at him for abandoning them the way he had, though she tried to squish that part down deep inside her heart. A bigger part, however, knew he had had to leave and was glad he still tried to stay in touch. She knew that if… no WHEN she saw him again she’d likely hit him for his disappearing act, but she’d also wrap in in a hug and never let go again.

Jon would understand; he always understood her.

A sharp swat to her head broke her from her thoughts bringing her teacher into focus.

“Are you finally with me, little dancer,” Syrio Foil chided. “If not I have better things to do with my time.”

“Yes master,” she replied respectfully, taking a breath to focus.

“Good.” He nodded tersely slipping into the first stance effortlessly. Arya hoped she’d be able to do so one day. “Now, what is it we say to the God of Death?”

Moving into her own stance she readied her blade. “Not today.”
Author's note

Okay, so normally I don't do this, but the continued comments have started to piss me off, so I shall address the one that seems to be the biggest issue people have.

Q: Is this an MPREG.
A: NO

Q: Why is Jon a bearer (someone who can have kids)?
A: This will be explained in later chapters. Also, because it makes an interesting dynamic in the story. Just because someone has a uterus does not mean they have to use it. However, I find it interesting how people's perceptions of Jon change when they learn this specific aspect of him. I think it adds a fun dynamic.

Q: does this mean he will end up with a man.
A: Don't know. The stories write themselves sometimes. Especially long ones. Certain plots come along that sometimes take the story in a new direction. However, the main story line is first and foremost Jon's discovery of his destiny to fight the Night King and his journey to that point in the story. at this point in time there is NO PLAN for any relationship with Jon. personally I like having everyone flirt with him and making him flustered. He is only fifteen, and yes while in this particular world/time period marriage is typical and mostly political he is still a teenager. Even back then they were hormonal and not completely sure of themselves or their sexuality. Mostly their marriage choices are governed by political interests, especially for those of the noble houses.

So, if the idea that Jon has the ability to have children bothers you, then stop reading and don't comment. This is fiction, it is not reality. If a story or the ideas in it offends whatever sensibilities you have, then STOP reading it and MOVE ON. It's that simple.

Thank you for those who have enjoyed the story and even those who have read it but chose it was not for them.

I hope to have more chapters out soon.
Sansa hated Kings Landing. Well, not necessarily the city or most of the people, but definitely the atmosphere. No doubt her younger self would be screaming in outrage for her current attitude but she could not help it.

Once upon a time she had dreamed of nothing but coming south to the grand cities and walking among the southern nobility and how perfect it would be. Thankfully she had had her eyes opened long before coming south that life was not a dream, thus she was not quite as naive as she could have been. Oh there were still things she had to learn, she knew that, but she no longer let the glitter of gold blind her to reality.

When the royal family was first announced to be coming to Winterfell she was very excited. Surely the tales she had heard about the king and his family were true, as well as the knights they would have in their company. Only her expectations were severely disappointed.

Oh they had all looked grand dressed up in their southern fashion and flare, however it was their attitudes that soured her impressions. The king seemed boisterous, if large and unkempt, yet his lecherous tendencies and drunken behavior was rather uncouth. Not even the Umbers acted that poorly when deep into their cups. The queen had seemed so perfect and ladylike, but her smiles were painted on and her words were laced with cruelty and insincerity. She truly looked down on all the people she felt were below her, which appeared to be everyone. She also clearly thought Sansa would be an empty headed ninny, as she constantly tried to sway the girl to do her bidding and fall for her sweet Joffery.

The prince was perhaps the most disappointing. He may be the heir to the kingdom but he was more like Aegon the Unworthy or the Mad King Aerys. Oh he looked so perfect riding in on his white horse, dressed in the finest clothes and smiling so gallantly. In the first meeting he had said all the right words, smiled oh so charmingly. However, his greenish eyes held a gleam in them that had her gut churning. Before Jon left she would have dismissed this, but now she had learned to trust this feeling and started to study the prince more. She found herself disliking him greatly. He might have pasted on a pleasing visage for her, but the way he treated the servants and even his sworn shield was reprehensible. Truly he was the epitome of what Jon meant by men in high standing not being good people. The more she learned about the prince the less she wanted anything to do with him. Never had she been so grateful for her father denying a betrothal than she was now.

Sadly it also meant he could not refuse the king’s request to become his Hand. Somehow this translated into Sansa and Arya going south with him as well, to ‘experience court’ the queen had said. Sansa thought the woman had taken it as a personal affront that her father had refused to betroth her to her ‘precious’ son, even more so when Sansa didn’t appear heartbroken at the news.

Truly the woman needed to pay more attention to her other two children and stop babying her first born, perhaps then the boy would straighten out. Then again maybe not. Arya certainly didn’t think Joffery could become a good man, and from what she had seen of his behavior here in Kings Landing she had to agree. It certainly warmed her heart the way her sister had stood up for her.

Thank the old gods their relationship had evolved over the years. It was sad it had taken Jon’s departure to truly open their eyes, but she was ever so thankful. Often she had used the advice he had imparted in his letters and the book he left behind to give her strength and help her see beyond the gilded masks the people in this city wore.

She was very grateful her other siblings had not been subjected to it. With her own eyes opened the
last few years she was able to take a more cautious approach to the games people played in court, and Arya was far too stubborn to let anyone change her. Her brothers though would have had real problems. Robb had changed much over the years, becoming the big brother she remembered vaguely from early childhood. He took his duties seriously and worked hard to prove he was a good person on top of being a good future Lord Paramount. He would have despised the way people acted here, as it would have reminded him too much of his own shameful past behavior. Rickon would be too young to really know how to act and Bran, well he would have been smarter about his behavior, but oh so disappointed with the way many of the knights acted.

Just like with the arrival of the royal party at Winterfell she had looked forward to the tourney held for her father. They did not have such events in the north, preferring to keep their abilities closely guarded, lest an enemy use it against them. Her father had argued against having the tourney because of this, and because of the cost. Really the king was rather foolish in the way he spent the Crown’s gold. Still, she had gone in with an open mind and a more observant eye. She definitely saw more than many would assume a lady of her standing would.

These men and boys played at having chivalry and honor but most probably had no true idea of what either were. Some like Ser Barristan and Lord Dondarion appeared to uphold the true meaning of knighthood, but many just pranced around in their finery enjoying the way the crowd clamored to them. Most glaring were Renly Baratheon and Loras Tyrell, neither of which had ever seen true battle or even fought in a skirmish is she heard right. Others were more interested in winning money or drinking themselves silly than acting like knights were supposed to act. Then there were those like Ser Gregor Clagan, true monsters in the form of men, who clearly derived pleasure from harming others. She made extra sure to steer clear of those men and to keep Arya away from them as well. No doubt her little wild wolf would find a way to challenge said knights, and father did not need such a headache.

She also had not liked the attention a man named Baelish had given her. At first he seemed okay, mentioning his past friendship with her mother. Yet the more he came around and spoke to her, the more her stomach flipped in disgust. There was something in his beady little eyes that did not sit well with her. Her father had warned her against the man, but he could not forbid the man from speaking to her as he was on the Small Counsel and therefore had to be more careful with their treatment. Instead she would tell her father every time the man approached her and what he said.

She knew that this man was trying to use her for some plot; what she couldn’t guess. He also seemed to detest her father, though his words were always ‘polite’ when speaking of him. So she continued to learn and listen, even going so far as to ask some of the small folk in the city about the man. Once again, Jon’s advice had come through. The information she had learned about him told her more than enough to know he was not the good man he portrayed.

At least her charitable activities and lessons helped keep her from the presence of the royals and Lord Baelish. Most of the small folk in the city had been distrusting of her, expecting another high born lady that simply showed up looking pretty so she could brag about her own goodness to the other ladies later. However, it was not the way things were done in the North. She had come to enjoy working with the children of the orphanage, even if it meant getting dirty in the process. Something about having the little ones looking at her with those big smiles spoke to her heart. The matrons of the orphanage here learned quickly that Sansa was not the typical highborn and she would get just as dirty as them. They’d come to truly respect her and welcomed her and Arya coming to the orphanage, even if her sister enjoyed helping the older children get into mischief. Those days tended to be the ones she looked forward to the most.

She wondered what Jon would think of her now? Before he left she was a flighty little girl who dreamed of being in the south. Now that she was living that dream, she wanted nothing more than to
return to the north.

“Ah, there you are Lady Sansa,” Septa Mordane greeted happily, bustling forward. “The queen had invited you to afternoon tea. Isn’t that exciting! You’d best put on one of your nicer gowns.”

“Yes,” Sansa agreed blankly. Taking a deep breath she prepared herself for another round of dealing with the queen and her poison laced double speak.
chapter 43 Eddard

Ned hated Kings Landing. He had ever since he’d first come here after the sack, and nothing had changed his opinion of it. This was where his father and brother were murdered unjustly by the Mad King. This was where Princess Elia and her daughter were brutally murdered by Lannister men, who walked away without even a slap on the wrist. This was where he first realized Robert was NOT the man he had originally thought he was, as he stepped over the cold corpses of innocents.

Time had not done much to change his opinion on the city either. While there were several new faces in the governing counsel, many were the same type of two-faced snakes that had occupied those positions before. And Robert… Gods how he had changed yet in some ways not. During the Greyjoy rebellion Ned had kept a slight distance, though Robert pretended it had not existed, or perhaps in his mind it had not. He was always happiest when going into battle. But the years had not been kind to his old friend, the excessive drinking and whoring had taken a toll. Ned could see now that Robert should never have been king; he was not meant to rule. In truth from what he had learned upon taking Jon’s old position, the man had not ruled the kingdom. Instead he left that responsibility to his Hand.

Ned was sorely tempted to knock Robert upside the head like he had done when they were boys. The man needed a wakeup call, though Ned doubted it would help.

Robert was stubborn at the best of times and he certainly had not liked that Ned refused to betroth his daughter to the prince. How could he when the boy had shown little to no good qualities? Not that he told his friend that. No, all he saw when he looked at the brat was Lannister. Considering what he had discovered during his time in the capitol he wasn’t all too surprised.

While true Lysa had sent Cat a letter implicating the Lannister’s in Jon’s death Ned felt something more was going on. So when he was forced south he agreed to look into it, which he would have done anyway. Thankfully his network of informants reached this far south. He was surprised at first, but so grateful. It was his informants that gave him the clues he needed to piece together just what Jon had been investigating. Of course to keep up appearances he had to go around and make it look as if he didn’t know the truth of the royal children and that he was still ‘searching’ for answers. This helped in ferreting out who knew and who just wanted to get in his way. So of course Varys and Baelish kept popping up all over, each using their own brand of vague words and misleading information.

Gods he hated the politics of the south.

It was even worse dealing with the Small Counsel.

Maester Pycell should have retired if not been dismissed years ago. He was a left over from Aerys reign, as was Varys. However, where the eunuch at least tried to help the realm, the old man seemed perfectly content to let Robert do as he pleased so long as he could enjoy the privileges of his station. Stanis had gone back to Dragonstone shortly after Jon had been killed, and from his informants, the man had been in contact with Jon steadily before then, which meant he knew something. So of course he had gone to hide away instead of dealing with it. Renly, the third Baratheon brother treated everything like one grand game. The boy had no true idea of war or what a good leader actually did. It seemed a theme that ran in the family. Ser Barristan was on it due to his position in the Kingsguard but his hands were tied due to his oaths to Robert. At least most of his advice was sound. In reality he had come to learn the counsel was mainly run by Varys and Baelish, both of which had hidden agendas.
Varys’ one saving grace was his concern for the realm as a whole and not just the nobility, or his own pocket, as Baelish seemed to be. Still this had been the man to whisper into Aerys’ ear for years. Who knows what his part in the whole rebellion really was. Sadly, Ned’s clear distrust did not stop the man from constantly trying to offer his opinion to the new hand. Thankfully he was wise enough not to bring up marrying Sansa to Joffery.

Baelish however seemed to have a disturbing interest in his eldest daughter.

If he could gouge the man’s eyes out he would. No man that old had a right to look at his daughter like that, and the comments about Cat were truly starting to weigh on the last of his patience. Cat had wanted him to trust the man because he was a childhood friend, but his gut and several of his informants warned him not to. So he kept the man at a distance, just barely managing to be polite.

It seemed even he had picked up a thing or two from Jon’s letters.

Every day he wondered how the boy was doing. Hopefully he had made it from Valyria safe. Ben had not had any more dreams and neither had Maester Aemon. Both were probably thankful that his time south kept him from harassing them constantly for any word. Not that he was the only one to worry, especially now that everyone was aware of the true enemy beyond the Wall. His eldest, Robb, had been left behind with instructions and the help of his most trusted bannermen to continue Ned’s plans. He seemed to be doing well from Cat’s letters, but this was not a task for a new Lord Paramount and Ned cursed Robert nearly everyday for forcing him into this position.

The man had nearly blown his top when Ned outright refused a betrothal for any of his children with any of Roberts. He’d thought Ned would jump at the chance for them to be family like they were meant to be. Perhaps at one time he would have, but not anymore. Especially not after meeting Robert’s ‘children’.

Joffery was all Lannister, and mentally unstable to boot. How Robert did not see it made him wonder. Then again, the man only paid attention to his own wants and needs and likely had nothing to do with the children. Even if they had been his, he would have left their upbringing to Cersei, which was a bad decision all around. That woman was a vicious butch, pure and simple. Oh she played her part, with smiles and polite words, but her eyes gave away the same arrogance and self-importance the majority of her family held. Tommen and Marcella seemed to have missed out on that trait, though considering the lack of attention their mother and grandfather gave them he was not too surprised. No of all the Lannisters the only one he could find any respect for was Tyrion. Dwarf though he was, his mind was sharp as Valyrian steel and he had a kindness about him many lacked.

Not that he would trust him wholly either. No the only people he could trust was his family and his own men, which were lacking here in the south. Even with the informants he did have they were woefully outnumbered by the spies employed by the other nobles.

The tension in the city was high, for all Robert ignored it. His ‘investigations’ of what led to Jon Arryn’s death had definitely stirred the queen up. He thought something might happen sooner rather than later to Robert. He knew he should warn his old friend, but without concrete proof there was not much he could do. And… gods damn him, but he doubted Robert would live much longer in any case. His excessive lifestyle had harmed more than just his figure. Pycell had casually mentioned to him how the king’s health was in a decline, his heart not nearly as strong as it once had been. There was also a very small part of him that wondered if this would not be a good thing. Robert was not the right man to rule this realm, and his death might be a godsend.

Ned knew well the only reason the majority of the realm accepted Robert was due to his bloodline containing Targaryens. The Baratheon family was started form a bastard line of the Targaryens and his own grandmother had been a Targaryen princess. None of the royal children contained that
blood. He knew Cersei thought it would not matter, but it did. It was the Targaryens that conquered and pulled the seven realms together, only one with Targaryen blood could truly sit on that throne, just as only a Stark could hold the north. It was only a matter of time before the others realized just what the royal children were, especially the loyalist.

The issue there stemmed from them thinking only Viserys and Daenerys were alive. The latter married to a Dothraki Khal and the former madder than his father by all accounts. However, Ned had information about the true heir, which he could quietly send out, but most would disbelieve him. Unless he had Oberyn and Doran Martell work on spreading the truth about Aegon’s continued existence. Let them gather behind the true king in the battle to come, for he knew Tywin would not sit by to see his grandchildren dethroned, even if he knew the truth of their birth.

Regardless he was not going to offer up Jon for that. As he had told Thorne, he would never let a member of his family sit on that damned chair. He’d seen the damage it did to people and he refused to let Jon suffer that. He deserved better.

Again that brought him back to the question of what he should do? He and his household were in great danger here. Thankfully both of his girls had done beautifully, making sure to stay busy to keep the undesirables from getting their claws into them. While he had not wanted to drag them into the intrigues of court they had pointed out just being here had involved them. It was better to have all the information to protect themselves than not, they had argued. Gods he was so proud of his girls. Sansa was blossoming into a true woman, constantly learning new things and helping those in need. Arya was just as wild as before, but she was also growing into her own with her new trainer. What really warmed his heart was the care they both took in keeping an eye out for the other. Before Jon had disappeared from the North he would have been very hard pressed to say either girl would EVER get along with the other. Now they were as sisters should be. Different in their own ways, but supportive of the other where it mattered.

Still, he hated the idea of the danger both were in, as were his soldiers. Jory had been informed of everything to make sure his men could be ready at a moments notice. He knew if Robert died, he would need to get out of the city as fast as possible. His instincts told him something would happen soon and the Lannisters had more men here than he had anticipated. The Gold Cloaks were littered with lions and the queen had personal guards from her family. Any move he made could be countered and silenced with barely any effort on their part.

A knock on his solar door broke him from his thoughts.

“Enter.”

Jory popped his head in, his eyes a bit wider than usual. “Lord Stark, Prince Oberyn is here to see you, with a guest.”

Ned frowned. He’d heard nothing of the Dornish prince coming to the city. As the Hand it was his duty to know of any arriving dignitaries. Of course he couldn’t put it past the man to sneak in, if only to irritate Robert. “Send him in.”

A second later Oberyn waltzed in with a stranger hooded and cloaked. Ned might have dismissed the other as a guard, but something told him this was more than that, especially with the way Oberyn was grinning. “Prince Oberyn, it is a pleasure to see you again. Though I never expected to see you in the capital.”

“True, I have hated this place for many years, but Doran requested my presence to represent him at the Small Counsel,” the man informed him casually, taking one of the seats before his desk in a lazy fashion.
“Had I known you were coming I would have been there to meet you,” Ned countered, before a brow ticked up in annoyance. “Or am I currently the only one aware of your presence.”

The prince laughed. “You see, this is why I like you Stark, just like Doran you have an amusing way of expressing your exasperation at my antics, yet you know it will never stop me all the same.”

“Then I count myself lucky I do not have to deal with you as often as he does,” he drawled, earning another laugh. “However, I also know enough about you to know your brother’s ‘request’ for you to come here would not have been followed had you chosen otherwise, so I do wonder why you are here and who your guest is.”

“Perhaps I am getting predictable in my old age,” Oberyn pouted playfully. “I will have to work on that. But you are right. It has come to our knowledge that things here are tense, and you are still investigating the death of Jon Arryn.” He paused as he studied Ned’s eyes. “Ah, so that IS a show and you already know the truth.”

“Aye, though it is a dangerous one to act on at the moment,” he acknowledged. “Far too many lions for my liking.”

“Agreed,” Oberyn growled lightly. “I am here to help you with this, but I am also here to let you know things are coming to head on other fronts, as well as introduce you to someone who can help the North with their oncoming war.”

Ned’s eyes narrowed at that, moving to the still cloaked figure. “Indeed?”

“Of course, let me introduce you…”

He was cut off when the man stepped forward lowering his hood. A long face and dark hair spoke to his northern roots, but it was the steel grey eyes that told him the truth of his blood. “Hello cousin. My name is Brynden Whitestark, leader of the Company of Roses, descendant of Brandon Snow, brother to King Torren Stark. I have come to tell you the Company is returning home.”

Ned felt his mind blank a bit. He knew the story of the Company of Roses, northern men and women led by Brandon Snow, who refused to bend knee to the Targaryens. They had traveled to Essos to get away from the dragons. He had not heard of them since, and thought they had long forgotten their roots. However, he could clearly see they had not.

“I would welcome you and any other member home, as the north always has room for her children,” he stated solemnly. “But why now, why not years ago when the Targaryens fell? They were the reason your ancestors left?”

“Yes and no,” Brynden grinned wolfishly and gods he reminded him of his brother Brandon. “There is more to it than that, but our return was not to occur until the right time, which is now. For Winter is finally coming.”
Jon was not pouting, no matter what anyone said.

Okay maybe he was pouting a little bit, but how could he not when they refused to let him do anything?

For the past two months he had been the ‘guest’ of the Company of Roses. They had found him on Valyria and had refused to leave him to his own devices. He would have been just fine on his own, and technically he had Ghost and Jedar, so he wasn’t actually alone. Apparently the men and women of that expedition disagreed. They felt five and ten was still too young to be on one’s own.

A group consisting of seven men and three women had stumbled upon him at the edges of the city. Ghost and Jedar had come to his defense, but none of them were ready to face this many opponents. The fact the group had four fully grown direwolves had not helped matters.

Xx Flashback xx

Jon stared at the four men and two women standing around him and his companions, keeping him trapped with only the docks behind him. He had his sword out in a defensive position. Ghost took up position on his left while Jedar hissed menacingly at them from his right. However, both lost any possible intimidation factor when four giant direwolves meandered up and between the gathered forces around them.

Full-grown direwolves. In Essos.

Come to think of it, the men and women had many Northern features…

One of the Direwolves barked harshly at Ghost, causing Jon to move slightly in front of his furred companion. The pup had flinched but refused to leave his friend’s side, which Jon was grateful for. The wolves and humans watching them seemed pleased by that, though Jon was unsure how he knew that.

“What’s keeping you lazy buggars,” a feminine voice called out, coming closer. It reminded Jon a lot of the Mormonts and Umbers. Jon let his eyes flick to the direction it came from, but kept most of his attention on the wolves and men closest to his position. It would not due to get distracted. “I told you to look… oh… Never mind then.” A tall woman with a robust figure, much like the Mormonts, came into sight, her dark hair pulled back in a style of braid Jon had not seen since he’d left the north, and her dark eyes calculating and calm. “And who are you?”

“No one important,” he answered quietly. “Just lost and looking for a way off this island.”

“Is that so,” she mused, eyes twinkling with humor. “Perhaps we can help.”

“No thank you, I wouldn’t want to impose,” Jon countered as politely as he could.

The woman grinned fully, a few of the others joining. “Never an imposition for the Company of Roses to help a northern brother, especially such a young one.”

Jon stiffened a bit at the name. He remembered from his history lessons learning about this company. They were formed by Brandon Snow, brother to King Torren Stark, the last Stark to wear the crown.
He’d led a large group of Northmen who opposed Torren’s decision to kneel to the Targaryens, even if it had saved their lives. Instead they chose exile in Essos. No one had heard from them in decades. Yet here he stood in front of the living descendants of those same northerners; a child of Stark and Targaryen blood. Considering their ancestor’s reasons for leaving, they would likely never accept him. No, it would be best if he found some way to leave their company. He had a mission to complete and surely they would not help a Targaryen.

“Again I thank you for your kind offer,” he repeated as calmly as he could. “However, I am quite capable, and do not wish to trouble you, so my companions and I will take our leave.”

One of the men snorted in mirth. “Oh you are definitely a child of the Stark family,” he stated dryly, causing a few others to laugh or nod in agreement.

“On one side at least,” another pointed out, his purplish grey eyes staring at Jedar. “He certainly didn’t get those delicate looks from his Northern roots.”

Jon tightened his grip on his sword. Would they attack? Could he and his companions escape? The best bet would be the dock…

“Leave the boy be, Jared,” a new voice called out, this one deep and growly, like his father’s. A men came around the ruins of one building capturing Jon’s attention immediately. He had the same build as his uncle Benjen and brown hair to his shoulders. The long face, nose and cheeks were all of the North, but it was those Grey eyes that told the truth of his heritage. Jon had only ever seen that type of grey in his father’s and cousin Arya’s face. Those were Stark eyes. “I have a feeling he’s been through quite a bit.” As he moved forward the others parted for him easily, until he stood before Jon. “Hello cousin. We’ve been looking for you.”

Xx end flashback xx

The man had been Brynden Whitestark, his many times removed cousin. He was the current Commander of the Company of Roses. At first Jon thought maybe his father had hired them to find him, but it was not the case. No, this went far deeper than a Lord looking for his lost ‘son’. In fact this went back hundreds of years to the time of Bran the Builder and a prophecy guarded by House Stark.

According to Brynden, after the Night King was defeated the first time a soothsayer had come to Bran the Builder and gave him a warning. A time would come when the Night King would rise again, only no one would believe for the truth would be lost to time and myth. The North will have grown lax and weakened by southern ways after dragons conquer and unite the seven kingdoms. Yet the dragons will be brought low in centuries to come, thrown from the Iron Throne they had fought so hard to create and the seven kingdoms would only be united in words but not in truth. The true purpose of house Stark would be lost with the death of an heir and a Lord, the second son not learning the secrets so meticulously kept. War would come to tear the kingdoms apart when a false ruler sat on the Throne. All that will stand between the Night King and domination is a child born of Ice and Fire. That child shall lead men to the dawn or lose the world to the night.

Apparently Bran the Builder had taken the words very seriously, why wouldn’t he. He’d built the Wall and made a deal with the Free Folk. They would not be subjugated, but they must be the first line of defense, warning the Watch when the Walkers awakened. Only over time this was forgotten, and men being men fought amongst themselves. However, House Stark passed the knowledge down generation to generation. Usually from Lord to Heir, though some shared the secret with their brothers or sisters. This is the case with Torrhen Stark and Brandon Snow.

The two were as close as any brothers could be, each trusting the other explicitly. When Aegon the
Conqueror showed up on their borders with his dragons, they knew the time had come for the prophecy to begin. They also knew that if they did nothing then the North could possibly be doomed to failure. So they devised a plan.

Brandon would pretend to despise his brother’s choice to bend the knee, and others would follow him in this. These men and women were trusted with the truth of the prophecy and agreed to leave the North to cultivate a secondary northern ‘settlement’. They would become a sellsword group in Essos, able to roam and grow adding strength to their numbers. This way when the time came they could help the North fight against the Night King, boosting the numbers of the North that would likely be diminished by the prophesized wars.

The Whitestarks, the descendants of Brandon Snow, with the blessing of his brother Torrhen, led the Company of Roses. Though many took natives as husbands or wives, all of them remembered the ways of the north and the true purpose of their formation. When they learned of the downfall of House Targaryen and the deaths of Lord Rickard and Brandon they knew the prophecy was coming upon them and the evil was finally stirring. Brynden had sent spies to Westeros to give them updates, which is how they had learned of Jon.

Even the Company had heard of Eddard Stark’s infamous honor and staunch character. With the events of the Rebellion it was not hard to deduce who his real parents were. So Brynden had his men keep an eye on Jon as he grew. However, not even they expected him to pull a runner, not that they blamed him. By the time they realized where he had run too, Jon was already in Bravos and beginning his adventure. It took time for the Company to catch his trail, but learning that Ser Arthur and Ser Oswell were with him had kept them from approaching. They had thought to make a move in Volantis after Jon had… parted from the company of the knights, but then he ran into Oberyn Martell and again they waited. Finally they got the chance only to learn he had gone to Valyria. Apparently the same woman he had run into before shipping out had informed them of the Jon’s path. Thus leading to their meeting.

Jon had been skeptical at first, but something in his gut told him they were telling the truth. So he told them what he’d been up to on Valyria and about the hoard of Valyrian Steel weapons he was planning to liberate for the North. The group was more than happy to help with this little project, allowing for several more crates of the weapons to be pilfered than what Jon would have been able to take on a smaller ship.

At first he thought they would head north directly, only Brynden had them heading back to the mainland just north of Valyria. The rest of the Company had set up camp there, waiting for the return of their leader and his group. Jon had been stunned at the size of the Company. It reminded him greatly of a Khalasar with the amount of families and horses spread out. Though the direwolves were definitely new. The four that had been with the scouting party had easily accepted Jon and Ghost into their midst, treating them like pups. They remained mostly wary of Jedar but were not hostile towards the small dragon so Jon counted it as a win.

Really though it was strange how easily these men and women accepted him into their number. While he wasn’t really a bastard he was raised as one for most of his life, add the fact he was a Targaryen, which most people of the North disliked especially after what happened to his grandfather and uncle it was a bit difficult to relax at their easy inclusion. Though he could tell that this group of northerners held true to the past in that they refused to judge based on one’s birth, instead they judged on merit. True some families were afforded more respect, like Whitestark, but it only went so far. Jon could admit he preferred this way of thought.

So he jumped in where he could, helping with chores, learning fighting styles and generally trying to make himself useful. He disliked feeling useless. For the most part he was welcomed with open
arms, the men and women taking time to train him and ask him about what he remembered of the North and what he’d learned of the true enemy. However, Brynden had not allowed him to do much else. He had offered to go gather information or help complete the last of their current contracts but the man had refused. Jon was still a ‘boy’ in many ways and Brynden wanted him to train more. Besides he had to stay safe to face the Night King.

Gods it rankled his nerves to be treated like this. Sure, he had at one time wished his own family would treat him with respect and care he was being given, but after so long on his own (even with Ser Arthur and Ser Oswell they let him do more, even if only because there were only three of them and they needed the extra hands) he hated being on the sidelines. In a way it felt like his growth and accomplishments meant nothing.

Okay so he was likely being very childish about it, or so his ancestors told him when he met them in the dream world to continue training. Still, he had a right to be miffed! He was the one who was supposed to be taking care of the Night King. Shouldn’t he be more involved with planning how they will be getting back to the North and preparing the Wall? Brynden could have at least let him come to Volantis with him to gather more information about what was happening back in Westeros. He knew that city very well thanks to Prince Oberyn. Instead he’d been left behind like a naughty boy.

“Still brooding little prince,” Marta asked with a rueful smile as she plopped down next to him a basket of peas between them that needed to be shucked. She was Brynden’s second in command and related to the Mormonts (which explained the similarities when they first met). She had a no-nonsense way of speaking that Jon rather liked, even if it was at his expense.

“Please don’t call me that,” Jon whined, automatically helping to shell the small vegetables.

“’S what you are,” she pointed out with a smirk.

Jon rolled his eyes. “That side of the family lost the throne, so I’m not a prince.”

“Throne or not you got royal blood in ya, on both sides,” she countered easily.

“I don’t want to be a prince. I’d rather be just Jon,” he huffed, looking over to where Ghost was playing with some of the other Direwolf adolescents. Jedar was curled up next to him on a rock enjoying the heat of the sun. “Princes get stuck in golden cages with ridiculous obligations and no real freedom. Plus they can’t choose who they marry, and people are constantly trying to use them or kill them. Better to be no one important than a prince.”

Marta chuckled heartily. “Aye, fair enough. But even if you weren’t a prince, you’d still be important. And not because of the prophecy,” she added when it looked like he would protest. “Everyone is important to someone. All it takes is one grain of rice to tip a scale, so that makes everyone important.”

Jon considered her words. “I suppose…”

The shucked in silence for a bit longer, Jon preferring to focus on his task. Busy work helped to calm his thoughts.

“I can’t imagine it’s easy,” Marta started calmly. Jon frowned turning to her in confusion, which had her continuing. “You’ve been on your own for a long time, able to make your own decisions and stuck with a ‘destiny’ that is too big for anyone to really bear. Yet you do it, pushing forward like a proper northerner, facing your challenges. Now you’re stuck being treated like a child again, forced to trust adults to do the work. No doubt your faith in adults, more so northern adults is a bit lacking.”
She cut him off again when he tried to protest. “I don’t think you notice it, but you’re far more comfortable with those who don’t hold strong northern features. No one blames you for that lad. We heard what happened to you growing up and if ye ask me it’s a damned tragedy. The north has lost much of the old ways.” She looked rather disgusted at this but continued anyway. “And for all that you don’t want to be a prince you act like a true one.” Jon balked at that, eying his dirty stained clothing and worn out hands before laying a dry look on the woman. Marta laughed heartily. “I said act, not look, ya brat. You care about people. You’re a protector, you look out for those who cannot do so for themselves. I’ve seen it in the way you watch the children or help out, the way you check on others before yourself. That’s how a true prince, a true leader acts. They take care of others. I think you’ve been doing it for so long you’ve forgotten that you don’t have to carry burdens all on your lonesome. It’s okay to let others help you, it’s okay to be taken care of by others.”

Jon pondered her words trying to form his thoughts into an actual conversation. “I… it’s just been… so long… I don’t know if I can…”

“You’re going to learn how,” a very familiar voice growled from behind them. Jon froze at the sound disbelief and fear warring within him. “As of right now any ‘adult’ privileges you had are suspended as PART of your punishment for what you did to us!”

Slowly Jon turned to see the two looming figures of Ser Arthur and Ser Oswell, both of whom glowered down at him.

“That is just a start,” Oswell continued angrily. “I’m gonna run you through so many drills you’re not going to have any energy to even think of pulling such hair brained schemes again!”

“How…how?” Jon could barely get the word out, gulping when their duel glares only got worse.

“Well, brother dearest…” A very cheerful Aegon popped up from behind Arthur, his violet eyes twinkling merrily. “Your cousin met us in Volantis and kindly guided us to your side.” He let a pout form, eyes tearing playfully. “Really, how could you go on an adventure without me?”
Aegon was slightly put out. Okay more than slightly. For the past week Jon had been avoiding him. Granted, he was being put through the paces by Ser Oswell and Ser Arthur for the trick he played on them. Aegon found the whole thing hilarious and even Ashara would break into giggles over the whole event. Connington was not so obliging, often sending glares at his younger brother, still suspicious of his motives even when Jon handed Aegon a dragon egg of his own and sharing how he hatched Jedar.

That had been a surprise. Jon had found a clutch of still viable eggs and had hatched one of his own. But instead of just leaving he had taken the egg he ‘felt’ was connected to his brother. Aegon had understood the moment he saw the egg, a feeling of belonging overcoming him as he stared in awe at the orange and black stone. The moment Perzys had hatched was forever etched in his memory. The connection was strong and he wondered how he had ever lived without Perzys before. Jedar was constantly playing with his little dragon, showing him the ropes as it were. Ghost even spent time with them, though most of it was spent fighting with Jedar. Aegon hadn’t minded and even found it funny, yet he had hoped it would mean Jon would spend more time with him. It didn’t.

Jon seemed wary of him now, something that really bothered Aegon. Connington thought it was proof that Jon had been planning something, but Aegon knew this was different. Jon seemed almost… afraid of him. Whenever Aegon was around he’d either try and find somewhere else to be or he’d be extra careful of what he said and did. It was beyond frustrating.

It didn’t help that the Company of Roses were not exactly welcoming. Oh they were kind and polite, but they were made up of descendants of Northerners who had left Westeros because of his ancestor, the one he shared with Jon. Yet, they had no qualms about claiming his younger brother as one of theirs. Jon was equally happy to be among them and no he was NOT jealous.

Maybe a little…

Whitestark had explained the whole prophecy and Jon’s part in it, though Aegon didn’t quite believe it. Really, living dead? Ice monsters? It seemed like a bad joke. Then again hadn’t his ancestors ridden on dragons and had dreams said to tell of the future. He couldn’t really throw too many stones, not with Perzys lounging in his lap. Jon had even explained about his own dreams, which led him to Valyria and his experiences there, though he didn’t go into too much detail. Arthur and Oswell had glowered the whole time he was speaking.

While he might not completely believe Aegon was willing to support his brother. He wanted to be around him, the only true blood family he had ever met. Yet Jon continued to be… skittish around him, which was completely unlike how he had been in Volon Therys. Had Aegon said something wrong? Had he given Jon the impression he was mad at him? Did he think Connington wouldn’t let him speak to his brother?

“You look to be deep in thought,” Whitestark stated breaking his concentration.

Aegon started a bit having not noticed that the Commander of the Roses had joined him and the others at their small fire. Jon was several fires away with a few of the men, listening intently to what they were saying, his wolf Ghost at his side. Jedar was currently curled up with Perzys beside Aegon. So only Connington, Ashara, Arthur and Duck sat with Aegon. Oswell was over with Jon, the two Kingsguard switching between the brothers to guard them both.

Aegon shrugged, aware it was not even close to a polite response as Ashara had taught him, but he
was feeling rather petulant lately. Said woman raised a brow at his action but remained quiet. His eyes tracked to Jon again, only to frown when some of the older teens in the Company dragged him off, the younger boy seemingly willing to join the fun.

Whitestark followed his gaze and let a small grin curl when he realized the problem. “Jon has become quite the favorite with our company,” he started calmly. “He’s a good fighter for his age and he can tell the others about the homeland of their ancestors, having lived in the north during his youth.”

“But why won’t he spend time with me,” Aegon ground out angrily, much to the surprise of those who raised him and the amusement of Arthur. Never had he acted like a spoiled child that lost a toy. “He wasn’t like this in Volon Therys.”

“That is because you are his older half-brother,” Whitestark stated as if he was speaking of the weather. “And you now know it.”

“What does that have to do with anything,” Aegon demanded, throwing a dark look at Connington when it seemed the older man was going to make one of his scathing remarks about what he thought Jon’s reasons were. “One would think finding family would bring us closer!”

Whitestark eyed him quietly for a moment as if judging if he should say more. Finally he came to a decision. “Do you know why Jon is in Essos?”

Aegon shook his head, though he noted Arthur seemed to grow more alert now. Did the knight not know either?

“Jon was raised in the north in Winterfell, as Lord Starks bastard son,” Whitestark explained. “Being a bastard in Westeros is not an easy thing, though some kingdoms are more forgiving than others, Dorne the most prominent. The north used to not care about birth status, as blood was blood and the winters are too harsh to worry about such trivialities. Things like succession are handled through very specific documents and records. Bastards never inherit unless no other trueborn family member is available. Still, it would not hinder their ability to make a good life for themselves. Or it hadn’t until the religion of the Seven started to spread from the south into the north. Many kingdoms feel that bastards are evil and sinful, thus treat them as less than human. Always suspicious of their motives and expecting them to rise up and attack the trueborns.” Here he swept his grey eyes over the group daring them to refute his statement, which they could not. “Now I agree there have been some in the past that have caused great destruction. The Blackfires being the most recent in memory, however, there have been just as many trueborns that have harmed their own family to say it is solely a habit of bastards.”

He shifted in his seat making himself more comfortable. “Now, the Company has always had spies in the north, to keep an ear out for any hint the prophecy was coming true. When the rebellion occurred and the Targaryens brought low we knew the time was coming thus I added some men to keep an eye on the children of Lord Stark. We knew Jon was not his, though he looks more Stark than most of Eddard’s true children. A fact his lady wife clearly despises. Her southern teachings did nothing to help, as she believes that bastards will rise against their trueborn siblings and are inherently evil.”

“She thought Jon is evil,” Aegon interrupted in disbelief? “Jon, who would rather play with children than hurt a fly? That Jon?”

“Fear is not rational, young prince,” Whitestark warned. “It can make even the kindest person do things they would not normally do. Regarding she shunned the boy. It wasn’t so bad the first years of his life. His ‘father’ and siblings cared for him and most of the northerners looked out for him.
However, at the end of the Greyjoy rebellion Lord Stark brought home a young hostage, Theon Greyjoy.

Duck spat on the ground at the name, having always disliked those of the Iron Islands.

“Indeed, he is still very much like his kin,” Whitestark agreed with the sentiment. “For some reason young lord Robb grew to like and respect the boy. Who knows what the brat whispered in the boy’s ear, but in time Robb started shunning his younger half-brother Jon for the older boy. That soon turned to hurtful words and outright declarations against his bastard status.”

“But… but he’s… he was his brother,” Aegon argued faintly. “Jon carries the Stark blood, he is kin…”

“Aye, and no one should ever treat kin in such a manner,” the man murmured, his face showing his distaste at such acts. “However, with his mother’s southern teachings and Greyjoy’s encouragement, Robb turned against his once beloved brother and made Jon’s life a virtual hell. Those two would often blame Jon for various wrongs they committed, leading to Jon suffering punishments that were not his, and often were overly harsh. This was due to the fact Lady Stark was the one administering the punishment. My men tell me Lord Stark did not know much of what was happening…”

“How could he not,” Ashara growled angrily, hating the idea of any child being harmed in such a manner. “How could he be blind to what was going on in his own house?”

“The north is the largest kingdom in Westeros,” Arthur answered thoughtfully. “It was bigger than the other six combined. No doubt he has had his hands full learning to be the lord he was never expecting to be, and controlling the lords he now led. With the Greyjoys raiding and the Wild… uh, Free Folk committing their own crimes he has his hands full. Plus his lady wife would not be able to help much as the northerners would not accept a southerner’s views on their ways…”

“Indeed,” Whitestark verified. “His younger siblings, well not the oldest girl, would try to help but there is only so much they can do, the same for the servants. It got so bad Jon knew he would have to leave unless he wished to join the Black, which as it is now is little more than a penal colony.”

Aegon was shaking with anger. How dare they hurt his brother! Jon was kind and sweet and always considerate of others. How could they harm such a kind boy? Even Aegon knew Jon would never try to take anything from anyone, especially not from family. He always treated people with respect, even when he didn’t expect any in return. Men like Jon were rare and to be cherished, not treated in such horrible ways.

“So that’s why he’s avoiding Aeg,” Duck’s question brought him back to the present.

“Aye. Jon was raised a bastard, which has it’s own obstacles to get over, even learning he is a trueborn son. To him though, Aegon is the true son and he is the bastard brother. His experiences with Robb in the same situation has left him cautious and afraid that the past will repeat itself,” Whitestark stated sadly. “Before you did not know he was your younger half-brother, so in a way he was still safe, but now that you know, and there are those that do not approve of him…” Here he glanced at Cottington, who had the grace to look a bit chagrined. “He is worried you might use him as Robb once had. Why risk his heart again when he knows his destiny is in the north.”

“That would explain a lot of his actions and reactions to certain situations,” Arthur sighed tiredly. “No matter how often we tell him he is a true son of Rhaeger as well, he refuses to honestly believe it. Jon is also a man of duty. He truly believes his part is to fight in this battle against the Night King.” Even Aegon could hear the strained tone the knight used. “So he will focus all his effort into that, even if it means his death. It explains more about why he sent us to Aegon…”
“Duty and honor are important to Starks, though some are better about balancing it with reality,” Whitestark huffed in exasperation. “We’re also stubborn as hell, and he seems to get that from both sides of his family. Thankfully he didn’t inherit the temper from either side.”

“No, he’s a lot like Rhaeger that way.” Surprisingly it was Connington that spoke. “Always so serious, always trying to take the responsibility of the world on his shoulders. He forgets there are those willing to help him shoulder such burdens, that he is NOT alone.”

A solemn silence hovered as the group thought about the man’s words. The truth in them rang true and left each with a strange feeling. Finally it got too much for Aegon.

Standing up, his temper flaring a bit, clearly inherited from his mother’s side, he spoke. “Well, I’m going to explain to him how wrong he is! I don’t hurt family and will not allow anyone else to either!”

The adults watched as the future king stalked off to where he knew he would find his half-brother with a determination that most men could never emulate. It seemed house Targaryen was coming together.
Jon knew he wasn’t being fair to Aegon, but he couldn’t help it.

He knew the older boy wasn’t Robb. He knew the other didn’t hold his birth against him. Yet he couldn’t shake the feeling it would only be a matter of time until he did. His father figure Connington made no bones about pointing out how much HE distrusted Jon. Now that Aegon knew the truth, surely he would begin to follow the path most trueborn children took in regard to the bastard offspring.

Jon knew he would never be able to go through that again. He had worked too hard to find some semblance of confidence in himself to do so. So he took the cowards route and simply avoided his elder half-brother.

Not that it was too hard considering how much time Dayne and Whent took up training him into the ground. He made a mental note to NEVER anger them again. Whent made sure he knew exactly why he was angry, going on and on about it as he made Jon run or perform various exercises. Dayne simply treated him to disappointed looks that reminded him greatly of the ones his father used to give him. Those worked far better on Jon than any rant Whent could come up with.

He had tried to explain his reasoning and even what had happened on the island to show they would only have been in danger. Neither were sympathetic to his arguments, even after Brynden explained the northern version of the prophecy. Instead they simply split their time between the two brothers, making sure Jon was never left alone.

Thankfully neither commented on his continued avoidance of Aegon, nor did they try to push him to speak to the other boy. Likely they figured it was something they would just have to work out on their own. Just because Jon had no intention of working anything out didn’t mean he did not appreciate the sentiment.

Aegon though was very close to hunting him down and forcing a confrontation if Jon read his body language right. This led to Jon trying to stay closer to the Company members, whom Aegon shied away from. In a way it helped him get to know the teens closer to his age, allowing him to integrate further into the Company. The older members preferred it because then Jon was not pesterling them to head back to the north or to do something, anything, in preparation for the fight to come. A fight he knew Aegon’s party did not believe him about. Sure Arthur and Oswell seemed almost knowing the moment he spoke the word prophecy, and remained oddly quiet when he gave details about the others, however Connington easily spoke against such foolishness. When Oswell had pointed out Rhaeger believed in the prophecy of Ice and Fire he had coldly reminded them how that had turned out.

For now they had all agreed to disagree on the subject.

Not that it mattered. Taking care of the Night King was Jon’s duty not Aegon’s. He was meant to take over the throne, as his ancestors reminded him in his dreams. He had hoped by giving Aegon his own dragon egg he could show he had no intention of usurping his half-brother’s place as heir to the throne, especially after Connington gave him the stink eye upon spotting Jedar. Something told him the gesture did not endear him to everyone.

Gods, if he lived through this he was either going to sail off to the Summer Islands or go North beyond the Wall and just disappear to be left alone forever! He was tired of dealing with people and their pre-conceived notions of him. Having Connington around reminded him greatly of Lady
Catelyn. Don’t even get him started on Septa Lorane, or Ashara Dayne as he had come to learn. It seemed faking one’s death was a family tradition.

While he could see why the woman had been named the most beautiful in Westeros, he did not see why men would lose their senses around her. Sure she was smart and funny on top of being beautiful, but her words could cut as deftly as Valyrian steel and she never bothered to hold her tongue. Jon did like how truthful and blunt she was, it reminded him of the northerners he had grown up with. Still, she seemed to always be staring at him searching for something. What he did not know, yet he felt she found him lacking in some way given how she refused to speak to him.

Perhaps it was due to her friendship with Princess Elia? Or the fact Arthur was essentially exiled because of his birth? Or it could be any number of reasons. Again, he was tired of being judged for things he could not control. So he avoided her as much as he did Aegon and his party. Let them think what they will. If they could not bother to get to know him, then Jon wanted nothing to do with them in return.

At least Drogo knew him. Mostly.

His eagle, Dagger, had managed to find Jon in the company. It had been some time since he’d received anything from his friend, knowing the distance would hinder any correspondence. However, he also was surprised the great bird had found him at all, as he was near no major city. Drogo had joked that this type of bird was rumored to hold magic given how great their hunting abilities were, but Jon had brushed it off. Drogo did like to exaggerate. Still… perhaps there was something more to it…

In any case the letter was welcome news. He’d learned that Daenerys was pregnant and Drogo was excited for his child. He made some mention of strange happenings in a village near the border of the Dothraki land but he did not seem too worried about it. Of course he also added several teasing lines and again demanded to know if he’d finally been wedded to a man. Really why did everyone think he would become someone’s wife? He wasn’t even sure he liked anyone in such a fashion. Sure, he found people of both genders attractive, but he wasn’t ready for any kind of relationship. Plus, with his uncertain future he refused to marry anyone knowing he was likely to leave them behind. It didn’t seem right.

At least there was more Targaryen blood in the world. Or so he had thought. The night after receiving his letter his ancestor Daenys, came to him. It was rare for the woman to show up, usually preferring to allow the others to train him (or torture in his opinion). Still she had come, alone as she was wont. Apparently she was going to use him to warn his aunt about a possible issue. Viserys had become even more unstable and would find death very soon. Jon was to tell them to burn his body and to place Daenerys’ eggs in the pyre. He was also to warn them to not trust the maegi, to use fire instead. He didn’t understand, as Daenys was cryptic as usual but he dutifully wrote the words in his letter the next morning before sending it off. He hoped that whatever happened his friend and aunt survived.

Currently he was enjoying a night of tales around one of the fires the teens of the company preferred to hang around. It mattered not if one was female or male, both enjoyed telling about ridiculous exploits and embarrassing stories of each other. Jon truly enjoyed listening to them, even if he didn’t tell many stories of his own. He’d never really been one to indulge in telling stories unless his audience was younger than him, and often those were made up tales. He’s pretty sure some of these were fabricated as well, but he saw no reason to add his own to the lot.

He knew Oswell was nearby, though he was giving Jon some sense of privacy. More like he was tired of hearing the nonsense teenagers came up with. Still, it was a nice reprieve, if a minor one. It
had been very enjoyable, until Aegon came storming over to them, yanked Jon up by one arm and nearly dragged him away. The others had immediately started to protest, but one glare from Aegon silenced them.

“My brother and I need to speak privately so this is a family matter.” His tone made Jon think he was the one with Stark blood with how cold it came out. No one wanted to go against the slightly older boy given his anger.

Soon enough Jon was dragged to a nearby outcrop, only the light of the full moon and the nearby fires allowing any light. Oswell followed at a short distance, giving them privacy. Suddenly the man’s magnanimous allowance for Jon’s privacy wasn’t so welcome.

Aegon paced in front of him, clearly agitated. When Jon shifted to try and escape the older boy sent him a look freezing him in place. Clearly he was not going to allow Jon out of his grasp now. With a sinking feeling he settled in to weather the confrontation he knew would occur.

“I am NOT him,” Aegon stated in a frustrated voice, finally finding his words.

“What?” Honestly Jon was surprised and not sure where this was going.

“I am not Robb Stark,” he clarified, frowning when Jon let his face blank out. “Don’t do that!”

“That! Close off your emotions and act like you’re fine,” he spat in anger. “It’s okay to admit someone hurt your feelings. Especially to family. And before you go on stating how we’re only half-brothers you can save it.” Jon’s mouth snapped shut, having been about to do just that. “I grew up for years with only Jon, um… Connington as my father. Then one day he tells me that not only is he not my father, but aside from an uncle and an aunt I am the last member of the Targaryen family,” Aegon explained, his violet eyes boring into Jon’s. “As for my mother’s side, I had two uncles and lots of cousins, but they could never know I existed. For my own safety. I can’t begin to describe the sheer pain I felt from discovering that I had no immediate blood family left.”

Jon did understand though. Learning that your parents were gone, and the ones that had raised you had done so by lying about your true connection to them.

“Then I find out I have a little brother, who’s cute and funny and I actually enjoyed spending time with, even if I hadn’t known our relation at the time,” he continued, trying to make his point. “A brother who was afraid to tell me of our relation because he’d been hurt by someone he called brother before.”

Jon had to look away then, memories of his childhood making him uncomfortable.

“A brother who thinks he does not have much worth, apparently,” Aegon huffed, running one hand through his hair. “But you are worth more to me than the gold in all the kingdoms. I finally have someone I can call family, who shares my blood in close ties that no one else can truly claim. Someone who shares the same father, and who understands the loss of that parent. After missing that for so long I am NOT going to throw that away. It is too precious of a bond to me to even consider such.”

“You say that now,” Jon argued quietly. “Robb cared for me too, thinking that we were brothers and it didn’t matter if we only shared one parent. But then he realized I was just a bastard and not worth his time or consideration…”

“And he is a bigger fool than most,” Aegon shot back. He pulled Jon forward, resting his forehead to
Jon’s. “I don’t care about blood status. I was raised in Essos, my mother was from Dorne. Trueborn or not, we share a bond of blood that no one else in the world has. I’m not going to give that up or use you as some scapegoat, even if you’re this ‘Prince that is Promised’. You are my brother and I don’t want to lose you. I want you to stop avoiding me and let me get to know you AS my brother! It’s my job to help you get into mischief dammit!”

Jon snorted out a wet laugh, leaning into the older boy more. “I don’t think Arthur or Oz will like that.”

“Just think of it as making up for the years they would have been watching over us if we’d grown up together like we were supposed to,” Aegon countered cheekily. “Now will you give me a chance to be your brother?”

Jon was scared to accept, he’d been hurt by an ‘older brother’ before. Yet, Aegon looked so earnest and really he missed having an older brother that cared for him. Perhaps… perhaps it would be okay to try.

“Okay.”
Robb sat quietly in the roots of the Gods Tree while Grey Wind played around the pool and ran with Summer and Shaggy. It was late at night, one of the few times he had any time to think anymore. After father had gone south he was now in charge of Winterfell and the North. Sure he had had the time a few years back to try on the responsibilities, however now that he was older even more was expected of him.

Let’s not forget that the Free Folk had managed to move there numbers into the Gift and New Gift. Their numbers totally a little over a hundred thousand. By the gods, none of them had ever even imagined they had such numbers! That was not including the giants, who while a much smaller number were still substantial.

Thankfully they mostly dealt with Uncle Benjen, who’d become a go-between for the Free Folk and the rest of the North. The Free Folk respected his uncle highly and were fine working with him, plus he spoke the Old Tongue, so he could communicate with the giants. Already the North was seeing new revenue from trade with the Free Folk, and the Watch was getting more men to help man the castles along the Wall, even if they didn’t take the vows.

Manning the Wall was far more important now that they knew what was coming.

Gods he hated the King for taking his father south during this time of need in the north. Did he not see the work that was going on here? Did he not care what the north was preparing for a war of epic proportions? One would think a man of such renown on the battlefield would be able to see these things. Only he didn’t, all he seemed to care about when visiting was drinking, whoring and lamenting the loss of Aunt Lyanna. Of course he did all of this in front of his Queen.

Even after Jon’s letters and father’s lessons he felt cheated upon meeting the king. The man was more of a fat fool than a king. He felt for his family, or he would if they had any redeeming qualities. Robb severely disliked the way all of them, except the youngest children, turned their noses up at his home. These southern dolts that dared to think themselves better when not one of their families can even hope to boast the history and power the Starks have held for over eight thousand years.

At least Jon had helped open their eyes to the world. It had made it easier to see through the pretty masks the royal family put forward. Even Sansa who before would have done anything to win the prince’s attention would rather spare with a sword than spend time with that pompous arse. Thank all the gods, old and new that father refused her ‘golden’ child. As if father would allow someone with that attitude to ever marry one of his girls.

He could also admit a vicious satisfaction in the cracks around the queen’s mask when she found out father refused her ‘golden’ child. As if father would allow someone with that attitude to ever marry one of his girls.

His shoulders slumped as the thought reminded him that he had once had an attitude as foul as the royals. In fact his had been worse, as he had started to disregard all of his family, thinking he was far above them.

At the time he had been so childishly furious for having his behavior pointed out and looked down upon. How dare they judge him, the heir to the north? Yet, now he was ever so grateful.

It had taken time to fully open his eyes, but when he had he had not liked what he had seen. At least he had a chance to improve himself and make it up to the people of Winterfell and the north. He had
apologized personally to every servant and soldier in the Keep. He had even apologized personally to the northern lords who had the unpleasant experience of his presence during that time. He could tell that his sincere contrition over his behavior in the past and his continued actions to correct it had done much for the people. They forgave him, but they would never forget. There is a reason the saying is the North Remembers.

Nor should they forget. His behavior had been atrocious and uncouth. He had started to become just like an enemy they all loathed, one that had harmed the north countless times. The Iron Born would never gain the respect of the north or even a tolerance given how they refused to change their ways. Even Theon, given a far better way of life than he had experienced on the Iron Islands, refused to dismiss such horrid practices. He could have been so much more, yet he chose to cling to a culture that would ultimately make him despised by the majority of the world.

Gods he had been so foolish letting the squid pull him in and change him. He heard the older generation whispering about the follies of youth, however he didn’t think they meant such colossal failures as what he had done.

He had single handedly almost destroyed their family.

Even now, though the relationships were far better than before, there was an underlying distance from his younger siblings. One that would never be breached until Jon came home. Even then it would all depend on how Robb handled it.

Would it be too much for the future Warden of the North to throw himself at his brother’s mercy and beg forgiveness in front of all of Winterfell? Because that is exactly what he wanted to do. Hells, he’d do anything Jon asked if it would bring his forgiveness.

Now more than ever he realized just what he had lost. He no longer had a confidant that he could fully trust or divulge his worries to. People always talk about how lucky the Lords have it, however they do not tell of the loneliness or stress that comes from the position.

Elbows on knees he drops his head into his hands, rubbing at his temples. “And all I do is screw it up…”

“You’re not screwing it up.”

Robb froze. That sounded like father, but he was in the south with the girls. No one else was with him as he’d easily snuck past the guards. Okay so they probably saw him and allowed him to think he’d snuck past, but still he was alone.

Slowly he lifted his head to look at who had spoken to see a ghostly figure sitting on the roots right across from him. Dark hair, long face, grey eyes. Yup this was a Stark, in fact it looked just like the pictures of his grandfather Rickard.

Robb blinked, then blinked again. Still there…

The ghost rolled his eyes. “Honestly, did Eddard sit all of his children down to teach them how to react in such a situation? I would think it was a typical reaction bred into our blood line, but I know for a fact Brandon and Lyanna would have had far more violent responses.”

“You’re really here?”

“Aye, pup I’m here.”

“Have you come to punish me for my inability to be a good lord?”
Rickard huffed in annoyance. “I don’t know what is going on with this batch but you all have way too little confidence in yourselves.”

“How can I have any when I seem to be messing everything up,” Robb argued sharply, a frown taking over. “I nearly ruined our family, and now I’m barely able to hold the north while father is gone. The lords may listen but they do not trust me, not after what happened in my youth and the Free Folk that I have met all look at me like I’m the Stranger come to get them. And with father gone south because of that fat idiot I’m left to try and rally them to war with creatures we have next to no hope of fighting! Plus I have to try and figure out how to keep everyone fed and warm when winter does come! Thank the gods Jon pushed Master Khan our way. The extra glass houses and income from trade have only bolstered our stores, but what if it’s not enough? Maester Luwin said the citadel is estimating nearly twenty years of winter! We now have nearly twice the number of people we normally would have had with the influx of Free Folk.” He had jumped up and started pacing as he spat out his worries to his deceased grandfather. “All of this is also contingent on the fact the south doesn’t do anything stupid like go to war or start one! And looking at that dumb arse of a prince I wouldn’t put it past him to start something that may force me to call up banners. This would take men away from their homes and families that need them. It would leave the north vulnerable not only to the Walkers but the Iron Born who would obviously use such an opportunity to strike!” He spun around noticing the broad grin on his grandfather’s face.

“Why are you smiling,” Robb bellowed angrily. “This is serious!”

Rickard chuckled reminded greatly of his firstborn Brandon, who also used to get worked up about such things. “I’m smiling pup because I’m proud of you.”

Robb balked at that. “How can you be proud of me after all the horrible things I have done?”

“Because you’re thinking like a lord should,” Rickard explained. “You are thinking about your people and how to help them. This is the duty of a lord. It is not an easy duty by far, but it is the thing a good lord does for his people. We worry about what is going to happen and what could happen and make contingencies. Afterall, what happens to the first plan when one goes into battle?”

“It often gets thwarted so we have to have several backups,” Robb immediately replied, remembering the lessons from Ser Roderick.

“It’s the same with planning for any situation with the north,” Rickard continued. “Anything that can happen, will happen. So it is best to come up with multiple, reasonable plans that the people can implement should anything actually happen. You don’t have to do it alone. You have your bannermen to help come up with ideas. Write to them asking them to come up with various plans for their regions should certain situations happen. Advise them you want everyone to be ready for such things so the north is not unprepared, especially with Ned in the south. While it may seem like an amateurish move, they know you are still learning the position, but they will appreciate you are thinking about such issues. It will show them you are taking your duties seriously.”

“But is it enough,” he asked morosely, plopping back into his seat.

Rickard sighed sadly. “I won’t lie to ya lad. The north will not forget what happened in the past. However,” he cut Robb off from speaking. “They recognize that you have seen your mistakes and you are trying to correct them. They also realize that a lot of the fault does not lay with you. You were a child and Ned really shouldn’t have let you have so much free time with the squid. His punishment was rather ingenious though, and a few have actually used it on their own heirs that got to big for their britches.”

Robb winced remembering what he had gone through as the bastard of Winterfell. It had opened his
eyes more than anything about how much he had taken his position for granted. It had also given him a taste of what Jon had lived through most of his life.

“Do you think… do you think Jon will ever forgive me,” he asked quietly.

“That is not an easy answer,” Rickard cautioned him. “Jon has been badly hurt by those actions. It compounded his already low self-esteem from being raised as a bastard. He is learning to value himself more, though it is slow going.” He took in the distressed look of his eldest grandchild. “It is possible though, however, just like the north he will not forget. Any relationship you managed to reforge will never be what it once was.”

“I know,” Robb whispered sadly. “But I still want to be able to tell him how sorry I am in person. To explain how I realize how stupid I was to toss our bond of brotherhood to the side for a false friend.”

“You’ll get the chance pup,” Rickard assured him. “For there is one thing that all Starks know and brings them together.”

Robb stared at his grandfather knowing instantly what he was speaking of. “Winter is coming.”
Oberyn would deny it if any asked but he was nervous. So much so he was practically fidgeting as he stood on the forward bow of the Flying Seadragon, a ship captained by Aurane Waters, son of Lucerys Velaryon.

He and his father Lucerys had been in Dorne speaking with Doran when Oberyn had finally made it home from his jaunt north. Despite their current rule under Stannis Baratheon, the men of house Velaryon had always been staunch supporters of the Targaryens, and had many blood ties to Dorne, house Dayne in specific. So it was no surprise for the second prince to find young Lord Edric Dayne in attendance to visit with his kin, while his father Lord Andric, handled the affairs of Starfall. The boy was known to be squiring in the Stormlands under Beric Dondarion, however the man was visiting with his betrothed Allaria Dayne, allowing the boy time in Sunspear. His father, wisely, wanted the child to know the rulers of Dorne as he would one day be a lord under their house.

After a private audience with his brother, explaining all he had learned and providing the picture drawn of their still living nephew, his brother had deemed it necessary to bring the visiting lords in on the information. Their surprise at Rhaeger having not one but two living sons had been humorous. Their sheer disbelief at the survival of Arthur even more so, though Edric had been rightfully angered the man had not sought to tell his family of his continued existence. Both Andric and Allaria had taken the death of their siblings hard.

They had been less accepting of his description of the danger beyond the Wall, however, his brother was not foolish enough to discount his words either. For all that Oberyn liked to embellish stories, he never told an outright lie, nor did he ever try to pass fanciful myths as truth. His brother knew when Oberyn was rattled, and this new threat had truly rattled him. Having several in his party able to back up his words, having witnessed the same thing he had, certainly helped.

It seemed he was not the only one with grave news. While he was traveling homeward, Jon Arryn had passed. Not really much of a loss in Oberyn’s eyes, however this left a large gap in the power structure of King’s Landing. No doubt the Lannisters will work to further their grasp on the throne. They had already had reports from their spies that something was not quite right with the royal children, and Robert had far less supporters in that snake pit than ever. It likely would not be long before the fat oaf perished in an ‘accident’. Though the king apparently wasn’t completely stupid as he went north to make Eddard Stark his new Hand. A move that normally would have irritated Dorne, but not really mattered much, until now.

Now things were far more complicated.

It was decided that Oberyn would make way to Essos with Aurane, who coincidently had business in Volantis. Once there he would search for word on their nephew and Jon. Edric would inform his father of the latest news, though he agreed to keep it from Dondarion as he was a Stormlord and this was purely Dorne Business. Lucerys would head back to Driftmark and informed his son, Lord Monford of the changes. They would need to work quietly to inform those still loyal to the Targaryens of this new hope. He had also warned Stannis had been seen recently in the presence of a Red Priestess. She was speaking of a strange new religion and had started causing unrest in the small folk around Dragonstone. There was even speak of her burning people for her god. None of them liked the idea of such a fanatical religion and agreed she would need to disappear if she could not be controlled.

Oberyn could feel in his gut that many things were changing and escalating in the manner that pointed to war on the horizon. He had felt this way at Harrenhall just before the Rebellion started.
Considering how many were lost then, he thought it logical to feel a sense of unease over it.

That feeling only increased when they made it to Volantis and he ran into a very strange old woman. How he had been separated from his men or his daughters Obara and Nymeria, he did not know, but suddenly he found himself being addressed by a withered old crone.

Flashback

He was traversing through one of the alleyways headed to the main port. His business at some of the more shady inns concluded with little to no fruit to bear. The frustration and anticipation were building in him until he might explode. True it had been months, but Jon was rather memorable, and surely someone would have recognized the drawing of his nephew Aegon, or Gryff as he apparently went by, yet no one seemed to know anything even with gold to adjust their memories. So once more he would be returning to the ship with no news. Hopefully his daughters or Aurane had more luck…

“What you seek is not anywhere you would think to look, snake prince.” The dry wizened tone started him enough that he actually jumped if only slightly. He cursed himself for allowing his thoughts to keep him from being aware of his surroundings. He knew better!

Dagger in hand he turned to address his stalker, slightly surprised to find a kindly old woman sitting by a door he did not remember, knitting of all things. Had he truly been that lost in thought?

“Greetings my lady,” he addressed her politely, manners having been ingrained into him, no matter what Doran thought. “May I ask what it is you think I am searching for?”

“Two wayward dragons of course,” she stated plainly, a slight smile on her face. “They have only just found each other again, only this time both know the blood that each carries. The bond of a brother is a strong thing, even when they do not always agree. Do you not think so?”

Oberyn felt his mind race putting together her cryptic words. Did she mean Aegon and Jon? Were they together? It seemed so, and this time Aegon knew Jon was his brother.

“Indeed, for blood is blood,” he agreed slowly, thinking his words through. “And where might I find these two reunited brothers if they are not where I would think them to be?”

“With the Winter Roses of course,” she stated happily. “But you’d best hurry, they won’t stay there long.”

End flashback

She had shooed him off before he could ask (demand) clarification. Thankfully he thought he had an idea. There was a sellsword company in Essos known as the Company of the Rose. They were from the north, hence Winter Roses. Finding out their location proved far easier.

Strangely he had never run into this group despite all his time as a sellsword in Essos. They were more inclined to stay away from the western section of Essos, though their reputation was up there with the Golden Company. While considered the most honorable Company in Essos, they also did not leave their enemies alive. A very pragmatic stance, much like most northerners he’d come to learn.

Aurane was actually excited to meet them, having heard tales of the company having direwolves. Oberyn scoffed. Stark may have them up in the north but Essos? Surely the beasts would have melted here. Then again, had he not seen actual magic and mythical monsters come to life?
Part of him wanted to march to the Citadel and laugh in the faces of all the old Maesters that dared say magic was gone from the world. No doubt the old fools would still deny it even if a dragon flew down in front of them, too caught up in their books. It was that reason, along with the ridiculous notion of celibacy, which kept him from becoming a Maester. He wanted to experience the world and live to the fullest. The Maesters simply wanted to hear about it and record it. He understood the recording of history was important, however he was the type of man to make history not simply observe.

A call from the sailor in the crow’s nest startled him. Land had been spotted.

“Not much longer now,” Aurane announced happily as he joined the prince at the railing. “Wonder what Arthur will say when he sees me? I AM his favorite cousin.”

Oberyn snorted. “You still tell yourself that? You’ll be lucky if he does not toss you in the bay.”

“Rude. Arthur loved me!” The captain huffed childishly, crossing his arms in defiance. “He would relish the chance to see me! As well he should!”

“I see you’re flare for dramatics has not decreased over the years,” Oberyn noted wryly.

“You are one to talk old friend,” Aurane snorted. “Though I have never seen you so nervous. One would think you are about to meet your maker and not your nephew.”

“Can you blame me? One of the last pieces of Elia to be alive and I was not there to help him, as I should have been,” he muttered bitterly.

“By no fault of your own,” Aurane reminded. “His continued existence relied on secrecy, and let’s face it. You’re too well known.”

Oberyn sighed in irritation. He knew and understood the arguments Aurane had given. They were in fact logical, and he was too visible of a noble to simply disappear. Still, it was his duty to his sister to help her children. He had already failed once, and now he was worried he might fail again.

“It will be fine, Oberyn. Just take it one step at a time, and thank the gods you have this second chance,” Aurane advised him gently before heading off to prepare the ship to dock.

Oberyn stared out across the bay at the small hint of land slowly becoming larger. Soon he would be with his nephew.
Gods be damned. They did have direwolves. Some larger than even Lord Stark’s companion.

The ship had docked without any problems, Aurane leaving his first mate in charge while he followed Oberyn and his daughters along with a small contingent of Martell men into the small town. After a bit of questioning they were directed to the large camp the Company of Roses had situated just over the main dunes keeping them from sight of the dock. However, it was clear the Company had seen them coming, given the group before them.

He could see hints of Bravos, Volantis, even Dothraki in the features of the men and women standing before them, but they were all predominantly northern. The months he spent in the portion of the kingdom made him more than certain of his observation. More importantly he knew the man leading them was definitely of Stark descent.

“Greetings,” he called out, never one to wait. Patience was Doran’s shtick. “We are looking for the Company of the Rose.”

“You have found them, Prince Oberyn,” the clearly Stark man stated calmly. Gods he even spoke like Stark.

“You know me?” Hopefully not too many bad things. He had been rather liberal in his time in Essos.

“Aye, we know of you Viper,” the man continued. “Though I wonder why it is you seek us out.”

“I am looking for two lost boys. One of whom I have a message for from his pack back home,” he informed the other man without outright stating who those boys were. From the look he received he was sure the other man knew.

“What makes you think such boys would be among us?”

Just as Oberyn opened his mouth to retort with a quite witty reply in his opinion, a blur of white pushed through the Company and past him, moving fast to his daughter Obara. All eyes turned to see the adolescent Direwolf, much bigger than the last time they saw him, sitting before his most stoic daughter looking up at her with pleading eyes. Few knew it, or would even suspect his eldest to be very fond of fluffy animals. The white Direwolf had clearly had her pegged back in Winterfell, as he would always find a way to corner her for belly rubs. Though she always acted tough and unfriendly, his daughter caved every time, much to her sisters’ delight. Right now she was clearly fighting her urges, not wishing to seem weak in front of everyone else. However, one pitiful whine and exposed belly later had the girl squatting and plying the wolf with his loved rubs.

“Let’s just say I had a hunch,” Oberyn remarked finally, his eyes daring the other to refute his claim given the clear recognition from the wolf.

The leader looked a cross between aggravated and amused. Oberyn only knew that from his time spent with Lord Stark, otherwise he would have thought the man angry. It was the eyes that told you what a Stark really thought at the moment. One could not rely on their facial features or even their body language, as he’d come to learn. Finally he just laughed.

“Aye, it was a good one. I am Brynden Whitestark, leader of the Company of the Rose,” he introduced. A round of introductions was made, though his daughters barely managed to nod, Obara too focused on the Direwolf and Nymeria teasing her sister. “Well, shall we take you to the owner of the white menace?”
“Please lead on,” Oberyn approved, his excitement rising though he hid it.

The group made its way over the sand dunes into the camp below. Oberyn and his men paused at the sight of the vast sprawling camp. It looked more like an army waiting for battle than a family group. The Company had definitely spread its roots since forming.

Here and there one could see children playing, women and men performing daily tasks essential to running such a camp. A large group were off to the side training groups of men and even women of various ages in combat. They were even running drills with direwolves. All around them were hints of Essos, but it was startling how predominantly northern the people of this camp were. Even stranger was how well he now recognized such a fact.

Whitestark led them to the far side of the camp, where a group of tents that were slightly different from the rest sat. There were no standards or colors to show who resided there, but there were things, little things, that showed the difference. Especially for a Dornishman such as himself. The hints from home were easy to spot for him.

In the middle of this little section there were two young men sparring. People were standing about yelling out encouragement and tips. They boys seemed evenly matched, though in different ways. One was taller than the other, lean yet still bulkier than the other. His blue hair held back in a low ponytail. His form was smooth and powerful, his strike a bit more by-the-book. The other was slighter and far faster. Where the other ‘danced’ this one flowed with a natural grace making each move look effortless. His dark curls were also pulled back at the top, much like Lord Stark wore his hair. Where the first boy clearly had talent from hours of effort and work, the second showed his was natural, as if born to wield a sword.

Oberyn’s observations were broken when Ghost took off, making a b-line for the fighters. Or so the prince thought. Instead the white wolf tackled a large creature sitting on one of the rocks off to the side. It was slightly smaller than the wolf, at least until it stretched its wings out.

Was that a dragon? No…

The pair growled and screeched at each other, rolling right into the middle of the fighters. Startled the boys broke apart, only for Jon to be drawn into the brawl between the two creatures much to his displeasure.

“GHOST! JEDAR! I TOLD YOU TO STOP,” the boy bellowed in aggravation.

The other boy just laughed at the younger’s predicament, petting his own creature that had flown up to sit on his shoulder, looking about the size of a large cat.

No those were indeed dragons.

“Surprising are they not,” Whitestark murmured gamely. “But they are surprisingly well behaved.” Jon let out another cry of outrage as his wolf and dragon pulled him down again. “Usually.”

Oberyn laughed as they made their way into the small camp. Now he could make out more features on the men stationed around the boys. He easily made out Jon Connington, even with his hair and beard dyed blue. Sure enough Arthur Dayne and Oswell Whent were close by, the latter cheering Ghost and Jedar on instead of helping the younger prince. He was not, however, expecting to see Ashara Dayne, dressed as a Septa of all things, sitting next to her brother. The rest he did not recognize but decided to not worry about it as his eyes finally landed on the one he truly came for.
He was tall and lean for his age, his features very similar to Rhaeger. Yet, he could see the line of his jaw and his nose were more like the Martells. His frame had more sinewy muscles instead of the trimmer muscles most Targaryens boasted. It was all little things, but they clearly pointed to him being his nephew Aegon, the last child of his dear sister.

“Arthur,” Aurane called out in glee as the man dashed for the knight, who easily side stepped his attempt to tackle him. “So mean!”

“I have told you how many times not to do that,” Arthur growled at his cousin, arms crossed.

“But I thought you were dead,” Aurane argued as he dusted himself off to face his cousin. “I mourned for you! And this is how you treat my delight at learning more of my family is alive and well! I am telling Andric how horrible his little brother is!”

The tinkling bell laugh of Ashara interrupted the cousins, causing Aurane to stare in surprise. “Well I for one am pleased to see more family.” She swept him up in a hug, earning a choked laugh as the captain returned it wholeheartedly.

Oberyn decided to let the cousins have their moment, instead he moved towards Aegon, barely acknowledging Connington. When he stood before the youth he couldn’t help but drink in the sight of him. “You have your mother’s smile,” he informed the shocked youth. “Do you know who I am?”

“You’re Prince Oberyn,” Aegon responded immediately, a bit shyly as well.

“Uncle Oberyn to you young dragon,” he corrected before sweeping the boy up in a hug. “You have no idea how happy I am to know you are alive and well.”

Aegon paused for a moment clearly startled before he returned the hug just as enthusiastically.

As he continued to hold on to his long lost nephew he called out to the other young man he had ventured to see.

“Don’t even think of sneaking off, Jon,” Oberyn called out, much to the amusement of those who had watched the youth try and do just that. “You are next on my list.”
Aegon was not sure how to act around his uncle and his cousins. He had never thought the man would just show up. Granted he had never thought to meet Jon either, so he supposed life just wanted to be interesting all around. He had learned how Jon had met Oberyn and saved one of his younger cousins, something he had neglected to tell them upon reuniting with the knights. This earned his poor brother more punishment from the two knights, though even he could see the pride shining in their eyes at Jon’s willingness to help those in need. Aegon was proud of his brother as well, though he knew Jon was a good man to the bone so it was not very surprising he would help a stranger. Really the more he learned about his brother the more he liked.

His uncle had given Jon hell though for not informing him of Aegon’s existence except in a cryptic picture. Aegon was curious as he had yet to see any of Jon’s drawings and his brother still refused to show him. However, he did enjoy the way Jon’s ears turned red at the tip in embarrassment every time he asked.

His cousin Obara had promptly challenged both of them to a duel. Aegon was more than ready to accept but Jon was watching her warily and not quite so quick. Obara had grown angry, accusing Jon of denying her because she is a woman. Jon had argued he wasn’t against fighting her because she was female, but because he could tell she was accomplished by the way she held herself so he was weighing the pros and cons of fighting her. Boy had that made Obara preen proudly. He’d been goaded into it in the end, but he definitely employed far more caution fighting her than Aegon did, which is probably why he managed to last far longer than he had.

Now they sat around their dinner fire, telling stories about how certain people, the Daynes especially, had managed to fake their deaths, and things that had occurred in their lives. Aegon could have done without Ashara telling about his misadventures in his youth, but he couldn’t exactly stop her. Unofficial king or not, Ashara would do as she pleased. His brother and cousins certainly enjoyed his embarrassment. Nym and Obara told a few stories of their own, but Jon remained silent, which was unfair. At least he got some revenge when Ghost chose to beg for belly rubs from Obara and Jedar joined in if only to spite the wolf. Poor Jon looked mortified at their behavior and apologized only to be brushed off. He had a feeling his tough cousin enjoyed the attentions from the animals.

Nym had explained how the wolf had instantly known Obara would shower him with attention when they first arrived in Winterfell.

“You saw my family,” Jon asked, perking up. “How are Arya, Bran and Rickon? Are they well? Have they been getting my letters?”

“They are quite well,” Oberyn replied. “They miss their brother a great deal, but have managed to content themselves with your letters and our assurance you were well. Though they were very impressed with the way you dispatched that Walker.”

Jon froze, his eyes wide. “They… they saw that?”

“Aye, many of us did,” Oberyn informed him seriously. “It was in the Gods Wood. The Heart Tree’s eyes opened and grew wide to show us what occurred. That is how your companion was able to join you in the fight. Before I left Lord Stark was receiving many missives from around the north reporting the similar viewings of the event.”

Jon groaned in despair while Aegon patted him cheerfully on the back. “Now they will see your worth Brother.”
“I would rather they use this as a chance to see the true enemy is out there and prepare for that,” Jon snarked back. “This winter will be hard enough given how long the summer has been. The oncoming battle will not be easy. Hopefully the lords of the north have not given my father too many issues?”

“On the contrary, they are taking the threat far more seriously,” Oberyn assured him. “They had not been completely accepting of bringing the Wildlings south of the Wall, but now they all realize the truth of your warning. For the first time in eons the north and the wildlings are working towards a goal jointly.”

“That is good,” Jon murmured, seeming to sag in relief.

“How much of a threat are the walkers,” Arthur asked the prince.

Aegon felt a bit irritated he was asking his uncle when Jon had given them clear observations about the fight. Still when his uncle went to describe the strengths and possible weaknesses he had seen, he understood why the knight had asked the other. While Jon had first hand experience fighting the creature, Oberyn had been able to observe with the eye of a trained and blooded warrior. He could see things Jon had missed. Seeing his brother listening intently, not the least bit offended about the apparent slight settled Aegon somewhat. Of course, Jon never seemed to take slight from people questioning him on important matters. He needed to work on Jon’s confidence some more. He was a prince, people should respect him and he should expect it, not simply accept people walking over him.

“Have the Free Folk been able to give the north information about the lands beyond the wall and what our soldiers can expect?” Aegon tuned back into the conversation.

“I do not have much information, though Lord Stark insinuated I would be right at home with many of the wildlings,” Oberyn stated wryly, looking far too amused. “However, it seemed most of them were working well with the Watch and Stark to prepare for this threat. Sadly the fat king has dismissed the obvious signs of the north preparing for a serious conflict and dragged Stark to Kings Landing.”


“Lord Arryn has died and the fat stag wanted Lord Stark to be his Hand,” the other responded with a shrug. “I do not know much more. I was in Dorne when the news arrived. However, after meeting the man I cannot imagine the Warden of the North leaving his people now unless he had no real choice.”

“Indeed not,” Oswell drawled. “I didn’t know him well but that man is far too honorable for the hellish political pit that is the Red Keep. There’s likely more going on than even we know.”

“I'll reach out to the Spider,” Connington spoke suddenly, surprising Aegon, as his adoptive father had been so quiet since the arrival of the Dornish party. “He might be able to shed more light on the situation. It will be better for us to have all the information before making any moves.”

“Father would not leave the north, even if the king asked it of him unless he could not get out of it,” Jon confirmed. Aegon still felt a bit irritated Jon considered Stark his father, but Jon had explained that Stark had raised him, just as Connington had raised Aegon. In a way he could understand that argument, as he did still see Connington as a father. “Still, how could the king not notice the efforts the north is taking to fortify itself? Surely he would at least listen to father’s warning?”

“Who knows,” Oberyn admitted with a shrug. “The fat stag has grown complacent and does not
really concern himself with the troubles of the people, even though it is his duty to. He prefers to
drink and whore than bother with actually running the kingdom.”

“It is why the kingdom is in such debt,” Aurane Waters informed them. Aegon wasn’t sure what to
make of the sea captain. Yet, he thought this man surely carried many of the traits his own ancestors
were said to carry. If he had not been told the man was a bastard son of Lord Velaryon he would
have sworn he was related directly to Aegon with his white-blind hair, lean stature and sharp
features. Ser Arthur had even admitted the man had been mistaken for Prince Rhaeger, only their
eyes giving away the difference, as Aurane had hazel orbs instead of violet. “He has borrowed
greatly against the Iron Bank and his good-father Tywin Lannister. The lions have the king by the
short hairs with how much he owes them, not that he seems to care. He left much of the ruling to Jon
Arryn and now he’ll do it to Stark. Still better them than his son Joffery. That boy is a menace.”

“How so,” Aegon asked curiously. It was very likely the crown prince would be his opponent when
he finally made a move for the throne. Connington and the others didn’t speak much of the boy,
instead focusing on his grandfather. It was likely the true strength behind the throne would be the
Lannisters.

“He is a cruel boy from what rumors my servants have managed to learn from the servants in the
castle,” Aurane leaned forward happy to share such gossip. Aegon noted the way Ser Arthur rolled
his eyes at the other’s antics but he didn’t refute his words. “Apparently the boy has long had a
history of harming animals, and there is talk he has moved to larger prey as low level whores his
father visits seem to be disappearing more. While he puts on a very pretty front to the court, he is
cruel to his own younger siblings, often taunting them and destroying their toys or possessions. The
Queen won’t hear of anything against her first born and the King doesn’t bother himself with the
child.”

Both Aegon and Jon frowned heavily at the description. This boy seemed as mad as their grandfather
had been. How could not one see the signs and try to reign the boy in?

“He will only be a problem if he takes the throne, because it is unlikely his mother will be able to
reign in his absurd orders,” Oberyn added to the conversation. “He is a truly spoiled child and has
not even been trained properly in combat from what our spies have told us. No the threat will come
from Tywin and his armies. That man is the true power behind the throne, no matter what the fat stag
or his cat queen thinks.”

“You just need to throw a pretty face at the stag to distract him,” Ashara snorted in distain. “For all
his claims of loving your mother, Jon, he constantly sought to bed any pretty girl that crossed his
path, even when Lyanna was near him. I may not have liked the way Rhaeger and Lyanna went
about their affair, but she was right to not want Robert.”

Aegon noticed his brother shifting uncomfortably from the information. He knew Ashara was not
being cruel and he could see Jon understood that, but hearing such things about one’s parents can be
hard. Aegon patted his brother’s knee affectionately to show his silent support, earning a wane smile
in return.

“The way he goes on about Lady Lyanna even today one would think they’d been madly in love.”
Aurane huffed indignantly, missing the sharp glances thrown his way. “It’s a good thing the king
never caught a glimpse of you Jon, he’d probably drag you to King’s Landing to have his way with
you, so much you resemble your mother.”

Jon rolled his eyes, clearly having gotten used to people commenting on his looks. Aegon had
already had to dissuade a few people of both genders from trying their luck with his baby brother.
Jon was too innocent for such things and it was his duty to protect him from the nefarious plans of
men and women.

“The king’s reputation is very clear, even here in Essos, that he does not seek the affection of men,” Jon pointed out calmly, despite the slight glow on his cheeks. “As I am a man, he would never approach me for such, regardless of looks.”

“Aye, but you’re not just a man are you,” Aurane disputed. “As a bearer you would be considered a woman to any southerner, thus the king would most certainly steal you away if he could.”

Silence met the statement. Aegon was confused by what he meant and he could tell Jon was as well. Yet, the other adults looked shocked at the revelation. Except for Oberyn, who looked more annoyed with Aurane than anything. Oswell and Arthur looked shocked and worried. Ashara, along with Nym and Obara, seemed surprised, but also a bit amused by it. Connington however seemed very pleased.

“Aurane,” Oberyn stated slowly, a hint of warning in his tone. “Jon was unaware of his status as a bearer, as were the others. I was hoping to break it to him in time.”

Aurane blinked at Oberyn then truly looked at the group around them. “Oh… oops?”

Oberyn rolled his eyes at the man while Arthur slapped him upside the head.

“What does he mean,” Jon demanded, trepidation clear in his voice. “What is a bearer?”

“A bearer is a very rare person,” Connington explained. “They are males who also have female parts, allowing them to carry children. The Targaryen line has had bearers before, always married to one of their own to keep others from claiming such a prize. Bearers are seen the same as daughters of a House, with the same duties and privileges.”

Aegon didn’t like the way Connington seemed so pleased by his words. He knew he was still worried about Jon trying to usurp Aegon or harming him in some way, despite Aegon telling him over and over again Jon was not like that. Hells, Jon had offered to take a vow to never harm his brother in any way. While Aegon knew women of a House in most of Westeros did not have the same privileges the males did, he did not agree with such thinking. He was part Dornish and they have always believed women have the right to do things a man would do should they choose. He certainly wasn’t going to force Jon into such a roll. His little brother packed quite a punch when angered.

Looking at him now he could see the way Jon had intentionally blanked his face. This was not going to end well. At all.
Oswell watched as Jon barely contained himself from shouting at the latest sparring partner. Ever since Aurane had let it out that Jon was a bearer, many of the men had taken to treating Jon as they would a woman. A rather foolish notion especially given how dangerous most of the women in this camp were.

It probably didn’t help that he and Arthur were being far more careful when allowing the company of males around the boy. Arthur more so than him, but it was just one more thing that was adding to Jon’s stress.

As Kingsguards they had been informed of and drilled with their duties should a bearer ever come into existence in the royal line. It wasn’t a far shot considering the majority of bearers had come from the Targaryen line, even if it had not occurred in centuries. So the Commander of the Kingsguard made sure every knight who joined were well versed in how to treat such jewels. Truthfully neither he nor Arthur expected to actually have to deal with one. How ironic was it that Rhaeger actually got his Visenya after all, even if she came in the form of a male?

Jon was taking it well, far better than many people Oswell knew. However, he could see the boy’s temper begin to fray over time. It had been a little over a week since the revelation, and the beginning of people treating Jon differently. Well, the men were, the women just shook their heads and moved forward with their lives. It was probably why he tended to spend more time with them, often sparring with Obara and Nymeria as they didn’t hold back like some of the men had taken to doing. (They likely appreciated Jon giving them the courtesy of doing the same.)

Really Oswell thought they shouldn’t bother. Jon was better than most of them before they found out, learning he was a bearer wouldn’t save them from having their asses handed to them by the boy. He was one hell of a swordsman.

The surprising thing about it all was how Jon had not lashed out at anyone sooner. He may look like Lyanna, but he did not have the hot and fast temper of the she-wolf. Nor did he quite have the quick burning temper Rhaeger could employ from time to time. No, he took more after Rhaella. Queen Rhaella’s temper rarely showed itself but when it did it sent grown men running for cover. His temper simmered under a cool facade of ice, never shown until it finally becomes too much and punches through the hard surface of his control, like a volcano. And much like a volcano it would destroy any in its path.

Oswell could certainly see the signs, though surprisingly Arthur didn’t. Then again his brother in arms had always been close to Rhaegar and he had admitted to seeing much of his old friend in his youngest son. Oswell thought that blinded him greatly to many of Jon’s personality traits. Yes Jon was similar in many ways to both parents, but he was also very much his own person. One who had taken much grief over his lifetime from many people who should have cared for him. Instead the boy had persevered on his own and had learned to keep his pain and anger close to his heart.

Oswell still wanted to ride to Winterfell and knock some sense into Stark and his brood. How dare the lord allow his children to treat Jon in such a fashion. Even if he had been a bastard, no one should ever treat family like that. Also, the lord allotted his wife far too much power allowing her to wield it against those who could not fight back. The Trout was certainly lucky the Wild Wolf had died before they were married. Brandon Stark would never have allowed such insult to his blood, or anyone under his protection.

Well, truthfully no one could know what the Stark heir would have done. The hothead had lost his
life due to his own temper and inability to realize how dangerous Aerys had become.

He was broken from his thoughts when another youth came up to Jon offering to help him with his archery, as it was a wonderful skill for a lady to learn. The boy didn’t get far before Ghost and Jedar had chased him off, both growling and spitting in affronted rage. Where Jon often hid his emotions those two certainly expressed enough of it for him. They had become far more agitated and snappy in the past days too, leading Oswell to believe the old tales of wargs. While he didn’t think Jon had warged into either, yet, he knew he had a connection with both beasts that was not the normal connection most shared with their animal companions. Even those of the Company who had Direwolf companions didn’t seem to share the sheer bond Jon enjoyed with his.

He easily followed after his charge as he chose to go back to their camp instead of trying to get any real sparing done. It had been two days since he’d asked either of the Kingsguard to spar with him. When Arthur had taken it a bit easier on him in their last match something had shifted in Jon’s continence. Now he refused to speak to either man, clearly unhappy with them.

Yup, the boy was going to explode soon and Oswell would get to say ‘I told you so’ to a lot of people.

“Where have you been,” Connington demanded once they reached the camp. Why the old blow hard thought he could tell Jon what to do still boggled Oswell.

“I was training,” Jon informed him as politely as he could considering his temper was reaching its apex.

“You need to be focusing on the duties you will need as a wife,” Connington instructed Jon righteously. “If we are to marry you off for an alliance it will not look good if all you can do is swing a sword. No man wants a wife better at combat than he is. You need to work on your sewing, and your manners. You will need to stop playing at war and work on making yourself useful to Aegon as a female of the Targaryen House, able to bring valuable allies through marriage.”

“No.”

Connington stuttered to a stop, shocked the boy had dared to refute him. Oswell settled down to watch the show, knowing the old Griffin deserved everything he got, as he was the one who’d been really pushing Jon’s buttons these last days. Ashara was nearby with Obara and Nym, Oberyn too was close speaking to Aurane and Whitestark as well as a few of his lieutenants, some of which were women. He barely nodded at Arthur when he moved next to him, letting him know Aegon was also here to see the show.

“Excuse me,” Connington bristled arrogantly. “I don’t think I heard you right. You are considered a FEMALE of House Targaryen and your DUTY is to do as you’re told and make yourself USEFUL to Aegon, the rightful king! You’re lucky a bastard like you is even considered worthy of being a member of his family…”

“GRIFF!” Aegon was glaring at his foster father, but it was not him that Connington should be worried about.

Jon took two swift steps forward and slammed his fist into Connington’s jaw throwing the idiot to the ground. When it looked like Duck and the others might try to stop the boy Oswell stood, hand on sword to dissuade them.

“I am a SON of House Targaryen and House Stark,” Jon informed the other coolly, his voice never raising above normal. “My DUTY is to face the Night’s King and defeat his army. If I do not do so,
Aegon won’t have a kingdom worth ruling. My worth is NOT dictated by my ability to bear children, just as such does not dictate a woman’s worth. Whether I have children or not is MY decision, and NO ONE will tell me who I have to marry. That you or anyone would dare suggest I am something less simply because I can give birth is an insult, not only to me, but to every woman out there. You should be GRATEFUL to every woman for their ability to bring children into the world ON TOP of everything else they can do, which is NO LESS than any man can do. I AM of the NORTH, Aegon is part DORNISH; both of the cultures of our mothers’ Houses know and respect the strength of women or any who can bear children. I am still Jon, I am still a warrior and I will NOT let you or anyone else treat me differently simply because of a fluke of nature. And before you even think of doing so, I dare you to treat any of the warrior women with the lack of respect you continue to show me.”

His grey eyes flashed dangerously as he swept them across the camp. “The next person to treat me as if I suddenly became some delicate flower just because I can bear a child is going to find my sword through their gut.”

With that he turned on his heel and stalked off in anger, his whole visage warning any who dared to not approach him. Indeed several jumped out of his way to avoid his wrath.

Oswell followed behind at a rambling pace, not worried about anyone trying to bother Jon right now. Only a fool would do so. Vaguely he heard Aegon demanding what Connington had said to his brother, while Oberyn informed the man he clearly knew nothing about women.

Oswell hoped the man’s jaw was broken.
chapter 52 Jon

Jon stormed over to an outcrop a good ways away from the main camp, using the natural rocks to block him from everyone else’s view. No doubt Arthur or Oswell followed him, but they were at least giving him space.

As they should, he thought angrily. How dare they? HOW DARE THEY!

He knew he was more ‘delicate’ than most boys. He had been teased enough by just about everyone he’s ever met because of it! He figured it was more due to his ancestry than anything, and in a way he was right. Still, just because he was a ‘bearer’ and able to have children did NOT give anyone the right to decide for him if and when he would marry!

Okay, so technically as his older brother Aegon could make that choice. Politics often caused such things to occur and as a second prince it was his duty to his family. But Jon would be damned if he let them all act like he was suddenly some pathetic little flower with no ability to protect anyone, let alone himself, and that he had to rely on them to make such judgments for him. He had been raised a bastard, and the one thing he’d been pleased about is that he would not be used for political marriages. How could he? No one in Westeros would approve of such, not while his trueborn siblings lived. He had looked forward to finding someone to fall in love with of his own choosing. Besides, he didn’t want to get married! Did they not hear him when he said he had to face the Night King? He wasn’t going to marry with that hanging over his head! He sure as seven hells wasn’t going to carry a baby, even if he wasn’t destined to this ridiculous fight! He’d seen what pregnancy did to women, the mood shifts, the strange eating habits. Not to mention he’d have to stop fighting, which no, just no. Wielding a sword was like breathing air for him. He couldn’t just stop. He supposed now he was getting a taste of what Sansa and Arya and all other women go through with their families. Well, they weren’t making him into a lady, no matter what parts he had!!!

In his anger he picked up a decent sized rock and lodged it as hard as he could at a grouping of boulders, feeling somewhat satisfied when it hit hard enough to cause a mark. His shoulder burned a bit from the exertion and his anger.

“My, my, I was not expecting the young prince to have a temper.”

Jon stilled at the familiar voice. Blinking in surprise and no small amount of disbelief he turned to find the same small old woman who had given him advice in Volantis. She was perched on one of the smaller boulders, her milky eyes gazing at him, or so it seemed, and a small smile on her lips.

“Uh… how… um I mean, hello my lady?” He blushed brightly at his stuttered response. Clearly he was not prince material if he couldn’t even get a greeting out.

The woman chuckled, though not unkindly. “It is good to see you survived your quest to the island. Though I had faith you would.”

“Uh… how… um I mean, hello my lady?” He blushed brightly at his stuttered response. Clearly he was not prince material if he couldn’t even get a greeting out.

The woman chuckled, though not unkindly. “It is good to see you survived your quest to the island. Though I had faith you would.”

“Yes ma’am. Thank you again for the food you gave me. It helped save myself and Ghost,” Jon added earnestly. He paused uncertainly. “How did…”

“I felt your need for answers,” she answered bluntly. “Answers others will guess at but not truly know. You wish to understand how you could be a bearer, yet destined to be the warrior Prince that was Promised.”

Jon flushed again startled at how well she read his mind. Yes he wanted to know that. Why was it
that he was always the different one? While growing up in Winterfell he was the odd one out simply because of his birth status. Traveling here in Essos he was different because of his northern roots, his looks or his fighting style. Now he was different again for his strange body. Why could he not just be normal?

A small stone bounced off his forehead. “You are normal. There is nothing wrong with how you were born,” she chided.

“But… but why are they all acting like it makes such a difference then,” he demanded petulantly. “Why is it they suddenly feel I should be wrapped in silk where before they were ready to throw me off the deep end? I am no different now than I was yesterday!”

“Very true, but they act this way because they fear losing you. Your gift is rare and special, as children born from one such as you tend to become great people,” she explained gently. “You also have a greater chance of survival in the birthing bed, something that is NOT to be undervalued. But you are indeed no different, just as any woman is no different from herself whether she can give birth or not. You were not given this gift simply to make you stand out more,” she advised him choosing to ignore his skeptical snort. “You are the way you are for a reason.”

“What could that possibly be,” he growled out. “To give Aegon a bargaining chip for marriages once he takes the throne?”

“Did I not tell you once that you cannot let anyone tell you how to live or what to believe? Just as you must follow your heart in protecting the realms, you must follow your heart in how you will live your life,” she countered smoothly. “If you don’t want to be a ‘bargaining chip’ then do not be one. You were born this way because you represent the balance of life.”

Jon balked at that, not understanding what she meant. Thankfully she seemed to know this thus continued her explanation.

“You are a child of ice and fire, north and south, First Men and Valeria. You are both a man and a woman, you can take life or you can bring it into the world. Life itself is about balance. With no death there can be no life, with no darkness there can be no light,” she stated sagely. Jon started to see where she was going with this. Life was full of opposites. For every action there was a reaction, and so on. “The Night King represents the lack of balance. He is wholly evil, relying on death and darkness. He is the enemy of life itself, where you are the champion of the living. Therefore you represent those you are fighting for. After all, without women there can be no men. You carry the strengths that each gender possesses, with few of the weaknesses. It is not something to lament but rejoice in.”

Jon grudgingly accepted what she was saying but could not help but cross his arms and glower childishly. “Still not having a baby.”

The old woman burst out laughing, the joy in her tone had Jon fighting his own grin. “As you say young one. What you do with your body is your decision. In any case you have more important things to worry about in the immediate future.” At Jon’s curious look she continued. “Westeros is about to be plunged into war thanks to the plots of overgrown cats. They will cause the game to escalate as the Stags fall to treachery, and the wolf pack is split.”

“Wolf pack… father, my siblings,” Jon queried worriedly. “Oberyn said father was in Kings Landing… oh gods the Lannisters…”

“Jon! Jon are you over there?” Aegon’s call startled him from his thoughts. He turned to see if his brother had discovered his hiding spot or not. When he turned back to ask the old woman more
about her statement he found himself alone in the clearing.
chapter 53 Varys

Varys had had several interesting months since Lord Stark had come to the capitol and taken on the roll of Hand. He had expected the honorable lord to be similar to Lord Arryn, if not more naïve than the old Falcon. Instead, Stark had surprised him.

Yes he appeared naïve about the way the capitol worked, yet many of the decisions he made had Varys wondering. The fact he refused to betroth any of his children to the King’s was a huge shock. No one had ever thought the man once coined as the Usurper’s Dog would ever deny Robert anything, especially not the ‘prestige’ of marrying one of his children. Yet he had done just that.

Personally Varys thought this showed Stark was a good judge of character. Clearly he saw there was something very wrong with Joffery and wanted to spare his daughter the headaches of dealing with such a brat. Just the thought of what Cersei must have looked like when told her dear son was not worthy of a northern ‘barbarian’s’ daughter had Varys tittering. The arrogant lioness still thought her child was perfect, willfully blinding herself to his enormous and numerous faults. It amused him greatly to see her trying so hard to prove her son’s ‘greatness’ only to fall short, either because of the boy himself, or the fact neither Stark nor his daughter gave them more than polite attention.

Another surprise if Varys was honest, and he was always honest with himself.

What little he had heard from his little birds in the north, the eldest daughter of the Lord Paramount had been a rather insipid and tragically naïve girl dreaming of knights and songs. She was supposedly the type of girl that would have thrown herself on a sword at the chance to marry the prince.

However, that was clearly not the case. The girl had changed greatly and he knew it started after Lord Stark’s bastard son had disappeared.

Normally a bastard child leaving would never cause any kind of stir in the realms, after all no one cared for those unfortunate enough to be born on the wrong side of a bed. Most of the south, aside from Dorne, followed the Seven to a fault, and the septons and septas seemed to enjoy preaching about what sins bastards were. People forgot this was mainly due to nobles trying to find ways to shirk the responsibilities they had to said children, as well as to keep people from realizing the trueborns tended to overthrow family more often than bastards. No it was better to paint those sad children as villains to save the face of those in power.

Few noble houses acknowledged their bastards or even deigned to care for them. The Velaryons were a notable exception. Unless one was from Dorne, or the North. The north still followed the old gods thus they had a different way of doing things. It had not surprised anyone who knew of the northern traditions that Ned Stark had taken his bastard son home to raise him. Surprising he actually had a bastard, yes, but that he took responsibility for him, no.

He had always thought Lady Stark’s reaction rather imprudent. She had been betrothed to the once northern heir Brandon Stark for years, surely she had learned of their laws and traditions when dealing with children true born or not. Clearly she had not, believing once married her Northern husband would handle any affairs as they were done in the south. Rather shortsighted of her, but not too shocking. Varys had come to see the Tully girls had a lot of foolish ideas to how things actually worked. Then again Lord Hoster Tully had lost his wife when his children were fairly young and the man had more ambition than common sense. Clearly he failed in educating his daughters on the reality of the world.
In any case, most thought it was finally Lady Stark that had chased the boy off, a very polite and intelligent child, from what his little birds could glean. Sadly he did not have as many little birds in the north as he wanted, so what information he did have was few and precious. It became even more difficult for his birds to gather information after the boy, Jon Snow if he remembered correctly, had fled the north.

However, he hadn’t even needed them to know what happened. Lord Tully had informed them all quite thoroughly when he demanded the King force Lord Stark to stop his ridiculous punishment of Robb Stark and reinstate him as heir. The court had been shocked to learn Stark had stripped his trueborn son of his name, forcing him to live as a bastard, until such a time he proved himself worthy of the Stark name. Oh, the news had been such a wonderful instigator of chaos in the capitol.

Tongues wagged for weeks. No one knew what had transpired exactly, only that Lord Stark’s eldest son had been the cause of the bastard leaving and thus earned the punishment. Lord Arryn had sent a letter trying to get clarification but the raven sent back politely told them to mind their own business.

He doubted Lord Stark knew it but he had set a rather interesting if dangerous precedent. Other Lords had used this idea to possibly discipline their own heirs, or in some cases get rid of the ones they did not find worthy of their house. When the king muttered about it not being a bad idea, he had seen Cersei freeze, eyes narrowed in rage as if daring Robert to try such a thing. Many had argued that the king had to stop Stark because of the problems it could cause throughout the realm, even Tywin had been antsy about the whole thing. Yet, in the end there really was nothing Robert could do about it. Stark was the Warden of the North, a land the size of the other kingdoms combined. It was also a little known fact that the Starks had a bit more power than most Lord Paramounts enjoyed because King Torrhen bent the knee to spare his people. Aegon the Conqueror had thought that honorable and had given the Starks a lot more leeway in the ability to rule their lands and family. Unless it was a direct threat to the realm as a whole, the king could not do anything in this instance. Lord Tully had not appreciated that answer.

In time though, the rumors and whispers about that incident died down, moving on to the next subject of gossip. Really, Varys had thought no more of it, until he realized the news he normally received from the north, limited as it was, had dried up to mere bits barely worth the time to gather them. Some things though had been interesting, such as the North making a deal with Santh for glass houses in return for heather and iron ore. In fact, their trade had actually grown, and very little of it was actual gold or silver. It mostly consisted of actual goods, which most of the kingdoms did not realize the north had. Truly he could kick himself for the untapped resources he had missed out on.

Another tidbit was that Lord Stark and some of his bannermen had gone to the Wall and then beyond. To date he had yet to verify why he had done such, or what prompted the trip. He did manage to find out the man had allowed the Wildlings south of the Wall and several of the northern keeps were being upgraded and fortified. Stark had also sent missives out to the rest of the realm demanding back taxes they owed to the Wall, more then willing to accept them in man power or materials for refurbishing the castles along the Wall. He had even stated the men sent to help with such would not be forced to take the oaths, and could return home once the job was done.

Something had raised Stark’s guard, something no one in the south seemed to know about. Well, most of the south. Prince Oberyn had apparently traveled to the North, rather unexpectedly. Given that Stark was a friend of the king whom Oberyn loathed, it had many wondering just why the man had suddenly decided to visit Winterfell.

No one knew the whole truth of the visit. Stark had responded to Arryn’s queries by stating the prince had run into his wayward son and was delivering information about the boy in person. Yet, when the prince had returned to Dorne, the southern most kingdom had started sending goods and
manpower north. He had also learned they were training their armies for more northern terrain.

With two Lord Paramounts clearly preparing for some kind of conflict it baffled Varys that King Robert wasn’t demanding what was happening and if there was someone he could personally kill. The man had lived for battle and conflict, and even with as corpulent as the man had become he seemed to look for any chance to shed blood.

Of course, his attention could have been diverted due to Arryn’s death. Even Varys had to admit he might not have noticed Dorne’s sudden interest in helping the north if he’d not been left behind in the capitol while the King went north. The Hand’s sudden death had not come at a convenient time for Varys. It had put a stall on his investigations and forced him to look at what was happening in the Red Keep.

While Jon Arryn had been an elderly man he was in very good health. So no one with any brains believed he got sick and died from something as simple as bad health. No there was more to his death. Any other man would assume since it was Pycell who made the diagnosis that Cersei was behind the man’s death. He had been investigating the king’s bastards with Stanis for weeks before it happened. However, Varys knew that was a red herring for what really occurred. No, the Mockingbird was making his latest move.

As much as he detested the man even Varys could admit Baelish was clever. It was a good time to make the move as the kingdom was now even further in debt, the king was likely to either be killed by his wife or his own vices very shortly and they all knew Joffery would end up dead sooner rather than later given the child’s madness. The realm was on the cusp of toppling, it was now just a matter of when and how.

Varys couldn’t be sure of Baelish’s end game, though he had a feeling it had something to do with Lady Stark. He certainly paid far more attention to her daughter than was appropriate. In fact, if he remembered right, Baelish had been in love with Catelyn Tully, only to have his ass handed to him in combat by Brandon Stark. That event had been the catalyst for what he believed caused Lord Brandon to learn of Lady Lyanna’s ‘kidnapping’. For what better way to get rid of a man you hated than to point him towards the then Mad King, who was known for burning people for the smallest insult. Making allegations against the crown prince would have been more than enough to seal the Wild Wolf’s fate.

He was still looking into that, though most of the trail had grown cold. Truly he believed the answers lay with Lady Arryn, but getting her to speak against her dear Baelish would be nearly impossible. Not to mention the woman fled the capitol to be with her son to ‘grieve’ her husband’s death.

He had a personal bet that Baelish would be the woman’s husband within the next year or two. Then he would have the power of the Vale.

Thankfully the Starks in residence seemed wise enough not to fall for the man’s benevolent mask. While Lady Sansa always remained polite she was very distant with just about everyone not in her father’s household. Lady Arya could learn more polite ways to ‘dismiss’ someone, but Varys rather liked her refreshingly honest statements towards his colleague. Even better Lord Stark had made it so his girls were rather busy, either in lessons or doing various charities around the city. Both options were perfectly acceptable for young ladies of their station and made the Starks very popular among the commoners, as they had shown to be better than the usual nobles who ‘helped’ the unfortunate.

He honestly commended the way both girls actually worked to help at the orphanage, doing actual chores and dealing with the children hands on. Not even the ‘divine’ septas bothered to get their hands dirty as these two did. Then there was Lord Stark himself, who had made sure to actually go into the city itself and talk to the people, showing he cared about their opinions and needs. He had
even managed to come up with a few ways to help alleviate various issues that had been long ignored by those with power. Such actions went a long way with the people, something neither the king or queen understood.

Varys had definitely not been expecting Stark or his children to be of any real use in the capitol or more than a hindrance to his plans. Now he could see how wrong he was, and for once he was pleased to be mistaken. Stark had a better head on him than most, even managing his own information ring. While nowhere near as large as his own or some others, it was still impressive, more so when one considered the sheer loyalty these informants had for the Stark family.

One could buy a man’s services, but it could not truly buy loyalty. A loyal man would go far above and beyond when their lord asked them too, especially when said lord rewarded such loyalty in return. Truly it nearly made him weep at the untapped opportunities the Starks held at their fingertips yet refused to employ unless necessary. He did not think he could have ever refrained from using such power all the time. Then again there is a reason the North has followed the Starks solely for millennia.

Still Stark was cautious and very hesitant to trust. If he’d not been so pleased with the man’s carefulness he might have been insulted with the number of times he had rebuffed Varys’ attempts to assist him. Granted, his actions were not altruistic. He had information he had wanted to learn as well.

However, now it seemed things were coming to a head. The queen was growing more and more frustrated with Stark and his daughter, as well as her husband. He didn’t think it would be long until the queen became a ‘mourning’ widow. Yet, that was not nearly as interesting as learning Prince Oberyn had returned to the capitol with an unknown man, only to go straight to the Hand instead of announcing himself at court as was proper. Not that the prince cared about propriety. No, what he found interesting was that the Prince had been in Essos again, and if his birds were right he had learned of the continued existence of his nephew. How he learned of him Varys had yet to discover.

What he did know, was that the rightful heir to the throne had met up with his half-brother, a half-brother Varys had never known about until he received a small missive from his birds. He was not surprised the remaining Kingsguards had not informed him of the boy’s heritage, as the child himself seemed to disregard it, but he had hoped they would have trusted him with the information. Then again, they probably worried he would find the boy a threat to his plans, and in a way he could have. Except Varys knew very well who this boy had been raised by and knew he resembled his uncle far more than most of the man’s actual children, not just in looks but in actions. No, Jon Snow, or should he say Jaehaerys Targaryen, was too honorable to try and take anyone’s birthright from them.

Really the information only made his respect for Lord Stark grow. The man had cared so much for his family that he defied the king and everyone in power after the rebellion to hide his sister’s son away and keep him safe. That no one ever even suspected the truth was even more impressive.

So now Varys needed to keep Stark safe, that meant he needed to find out what was going on and show his own hand, at least some of it. He could admit he found it a bit strange to be acting in the open as he was, but the needs must. So here he was making his way up the Tower of the Hand to join a meeting he knew the Hand was currently in with Prince Oberyn and their mystery guest.

“I’m afraid Lord Stark is busy now Lord Varys,” Stark’s main guard, Ser Jory if he remembered correctly, informed him firmly. “He will not be available for some time.”

“On the contrary Ser Jory, I believe I have information Lord Stark and Prince Oberyn would find imperative to whatever plans they are making. Especially if said plans involve Jon Snow.”
He saw the guard tense, his hands moving automatically to his sword, the other Northern guards in the area showing similar movements. It seemed they were very protective of the boy, not just their liege lords, interesting. Ser Jory considered his words before finally coming to a decision.

“Wait here, I’ll see if Lord Stark will see you.”

“But of course,” Varys replied monogamously.

Varys kept his face blank as he waited, not bothered by the looks the other guards sent his way. Inside he was nearly vibrating with excitement. Finally things were beginning to come to a head and he might just have the ability to bring the realm back under the control of those who truly deserved to rule it, and the rulers the people of the realm truly deserved.
The Three-eyed Raven watched closely as the Walker passed by underneath the tree where he sat high in the branches. He didn’t move a muscle or ruffle one feather. As of yet the creature had not noticed him. The Night King had grown bolder in sending his minions out to gather the dead, or in some case, make more dead for their army.

No doubt the Night King had found out about the prince. Bloodraven had felt the boy as soon as he started traversing the dream realm allowing him to see the Wall and beyond. When he’d been at Winterfell the spells protecting the ancient Keep had likely helped hide him. Thankfully the boy’s ancestors had stepped in before the Night King or his First Lieutenant could capture his spirit. When that failed they had tried a fancy piece of magic that allowed the First Lieutenant to travel through the Weirwood to where the boy was on Valyria. Bloodraven had felt his heart almost stop when that occurred. He had yet to discover just how the Night King had managed the feat, nor had the Children gleaned anything.

It was that piece of magic that had allowed the rest of the Weirwoods to connect and show what had transpired. Even now he can remember the anger tinged with fear he had spotted in the Night King’s eyes as his Lieutenant was defeated. The beast had tried to take it out on his raven form, but Bloodraven had fled before he took any damage.

The Night King had retreated back into his ‘prison’ and soon after his ‘recruitment’ increased. Thankfully aside from a few lingering clans and that fool Castor, there was no one to fill his army with. Mance and Lord Stark had brokered an agreement and the majority of the Free Folk had fled south of the Wall, now protected by the ancient enchantments from certain death. The Children had not fled simply because Bloodraven could not, and they wished to stall the Night King and his army as much as possible.

For a time the Night King had been quiet magically, no doubt trying to recover from what he had spent pulling his last move. It was only recently that he’d begun to feel the Night King reaching out into the realm of dreams again, likely searching for the prince. Bloodraven knew he would need to warn the boy, as the Night King’s power would only grow, making it harder for the boy to hide.

His raven form took off, heading back to his location once he was sure the creature had left the area. Through the bird’s eyes he saw the aged Heart Tree and a few of the Children around it. Once the bird settled in the branches Bloodraven blinked his eyes and awoke within his own body.

Gratefully he accepted the food and water Leaf offered him. He would need to rest before attempting to reach the prince in the dream realm. Perhaps while there he can meet up with Brandon Stark. Though his magic had not opened up as it could have, his mind was far more open than it had been in the past, allowing Bloodraven to reach out to the child. Perhaps he could see them both at once? It would certainly be easier on him to do so.

Ah well, he’d try, but first a nap…

Xxxx

Bran wasn’t sure what was going on. He was in the Gods Wood and Summer was there too, however he was sure he’d just gone to bed. In fact he distinctly remembered Rickon sneaking into his room as he was want to do these past months and slipping into bed with him. His younger brother had not taken the departure of father, Sansa and Arya well. He was afraid they would never see them again, much like when Jon left. Of course Arya always told them Jon would be back one day, yet as
the years dragged on even Bran had a hard time keeping faith in those words.

The closest they had come to knowing more about Jon’s whereabouts and health was when Prince Oberyn had come to Winterfell. It had been a very exciting time and the Prince looked everything he thought a warrior and noble from the south should be, even if the Dornish were always said to be unconventional (or so mother said, Bran wasn’t quite sure what the word meant).

When less than a week after the prince and his family had left they had heard the King was coming with most of the court Bran had been ecstatic. Surely this would be even better than the prince, because this was the man his father told stories about. As an added bonus the Kingsguards would be there, the very best of the knights in all the realms!

However, Bran had felt nothing but disappointment.

The king was fat and acted nothing like the stories. He ignored his wife and children and didn’t act anything like a king should. The Queen and the crown prince were both aloof and cruel with their words. Tommen was okay as was Myrcella, but both were rather boring. Their uncle, Jamie Lannister looked everything a knight should, but his attitude and words were very off putting. Most of the knights that came with the king were nothing like Bran thought a knight should be. In fact, many didn’t even compare to Oberyn and his men. The Dornish may have been a bit bawdy and free with their words, but they still gave respect to all of the people in Winterfell, not just the Stark family. These people from the court looked down on everyone as if they were somehow less than them, even his father who was Warden of all the North.

If most southerners were like this he could see why so few Northmen decided to become knights, even with the fact most knights followed the Seven.

It was a very disappointing yet strangely educational visit. It seemed to drive home Jon’s earlier letters reminding them to never take anyone at face value, and status did not make a person good. One only had to look at the servants to see the truth of this. While those that served the Starks were generally happy folks, those that served the king and his court were clearly mistreated and unhappy. Father always warned them to never mistreat those of lower standing, for it would come back to haunt you in the end. Had they not seen that when Robb was punished?

Hearing Summer tripping over the roots of the Heart Tree broke him from his thoughts. He moved forward to help untangle his wolf, chiding him for being clumsy. Taking a closer look at the tree he realized it was one he’d never seen before. This one was actually smiling, unlike most Heart Trees who wore more severe faces.

Clearly he was not in Winterfell. But then… where was he?

A large fury body slammed into him, knocking him down into Summer and soon Bran found himself in a pile of fur. Summer yipped earning one in return from his unknown foe. Bran tried to break them up, but the two direwolves were a bit stronger and bigger than him, leaving him to the mercy of their tongues.

“Knock it off you two,” a male voice huffed in amused irritation. Two strong hands reached in and pulled Bran from the mass of wriggling fur. Bran thought the voice sounded familiar but deeper than he remembered.

“Jon,” he asked barely able to believe it.

“Hello Bran, you’ve gotten big…”
He didn’t let the other continue as he barreled into him, wrapping his arms tight around his brother.

“JON!” Bran felt a few tears leak out of his eyes as he burrowed into his missing brother’s chest. Gods he had missed the older boy.

“I missed you too Bran,” the other responded kindly, returning the embrace warmly.

After a few more minutes Bran finally pulled back, wiping away his tear and staring at the taller, older looking Jon. He wasn’t much different from the vision they saw months ago, but it was different standing in front of him.

“What are we? How are you here? Did you come home?”

Jon placed a hand over his mouth. “One question at a time,” he chuckled. “I am not home, not yet. This is the dream world, I often come here when I sleep, though not always this particular spot. Though I do believe this is the first time you have been here…”

“So… I’m still sleeping,” Bran asked thoughtfully. “This is just a dream and you’re made up?”

“Yes you are sleeping, but no this is not made up,” Jon assured him. “Our family, the Stark blood, has magic in it. Sometimes our dreams are not just dreams. In fact I met Uncle Benjen here once, along with Maester Aemon from the Wall.”

“Really?” Bran’s eyes were wide at the thought. It sounded like a fairytale Old Nan used to tell them. However, so had giants, and they were real. He’d even seen a few when they’d come to Winterfell with Mance Rayder.

“The prince tells you the truth,” a new voice responded before Jon could.

Quicker than Bran expected Jon was in front of him and both wolves were by his side, facing the unknown person. Peaking out from behind his brother Bran took in the tall figure of an old man, who looked stronger than his age suggested. He was dressed in a long black robe, his hands visible before him, with no apparent weapons.

“Peace young prince, I do not mean any harm,” he addressed Jon. But why was he calling him prince? “Nor do I mean young Brandon any harm. I have come to speak to both of you about the threat in the far north.”

“You know us sir, but what is your name,” Jon replied calmly. He kept the defensive position and Bran couldn’t help but think this was what a true knight should look like.

“I have gone by a few names in my time,” the man responded wryly. “I was born Brynden Rivers, son of Aegon the IV, once Hand of the King, Lord Commander of the Nights Watch, Lord Bloodraven. Now I am the Three Eyed Raven, once the last greenseer in Westeros.”

“Once,” Jon questioned, though Bran was still trying to get over all the other titles. This man was a great knight! He’d lead the Nights Watch and he was written about in the histories as a great warrior. Yet, that was many decades ago, how was he still alive? What’s a greenseer?

“Aye, it seems another has been born with the gift, though it has yet to fully manifest,” he explained. Bran was confused by what he was saying, yet Jon seemed to get more anxious. “As you know the Night King is awake in the far north and he plans to bring an army to the Wall.”

Bran’s eyes grew wide in fear and awe. Was this what his father was preparing for? Is this why the Wildlings were let through the gates? So the creature Jon had fought was a Walker? But how did it
get to Essos? Bran glanced at his brother who looked worried yet not surprised by the information.

“Aye, though I understand father let many of the Free Folk through the Wall, so his army should be much less than he anticipated.”

“Yes, we are very thankful you were able to get a message to Lord Stark,” Brynden acknowledged. “There were many possible futures where this did not occur. The north would have been ill prepared for the coming war and many would perish including your family.”

Bran could feel the flinch Jon gave, and he glanced up seeing the sadness in his brother’s eyes. Reaching he hugged his brother from behind to remind him that it hadn’t happened that way, that his family was alive and well. It wasn’t much, but Jon managed to relax some.

“Now though the realms of men have a chance against the coming storm,” the other continued as if he had not seen the interaction between the two. “I came to warn you.” Here he looked directly at Jon. “And to speak to my successor.” Now his eyes were on Bran.

“Successor,” Jon pushed protectively. “Bran is to be the next Three Eyed Raven. Why?”

“The gift is strongest in him,” Brynden explained calmly. “It will continue to awaken as more and more magic comes back to Westeros. Already he is learning to warg, not just into his wolf, but other creatures.”

Bran’s eyes widened. “You mean the dreams? Where I’m flying or in trees? Or hunting with Grey Wind and Shaggy? Those are really real?”

“Yes they are, and you are beginning to learn you can warg even when you are not asleep, aren’t you?”

Jon turned to his brother and Bran shrunk back a bit in shame. He hadn’t told anyone about these dreams or the fact they’d been happening in the daytime too now. He’d thought it just his imagination, though sometimes he tasted blood after Summer made a kill or he still felt the cold sting of wind after a flight.

“Bran, is this true,” Jon asked him, slowly kneeling in front of his brother. He made sure to stay angled so he could see Brynden, but gave his attention to the young boy.

“Yes… but I didn’t mean too! I thought it was just my mind having fun… it didn’t seem to be any harm,” Bran rambled, growing more and more worried.

“Bran,” Jon cut him off gently. “As I said before, our blood contains magic. Dreams for us are not just dreams. There are others that can do the same, and if you are not careful you can be hurt. I’m not angry,” he assured the other, noting the tears swimming in his eyes. “I am merely worried for you. A skill like this, though rare, needs to be treated very carefully.”

“Indeed,” Brynden added moving a bit closer, though still a distance away to keep the direwolves from reacting. “Your gift is very strong and grows stronger. I wish to teach you how to utilize the gift, for one day my time will end, and another will need to take my place to help protect the realms of men from the dangers of the darkness. You are the only one strong enough to do so.”

Bran was conflicted. On the one hand he was very excited, yet on the other he knew this was a very serious offer and he didn’t truly understand everything that went with it. Jon looked like he wanted to disagree outright, however he kept his tongue. Why was Jon against him learning or becoming the Three Eyed Raven?
“Will he have to go where you are,” Jon suddenly queried. “Last I heard you were lost beyond the Wall. Bran is only a child, going beyond the Wall would be very dangerous and I seriously doubt his parents would allow it.”

“In the past I would have said yes,” Brynden answered ruefully. “However, your actions have strengthened the north and Bran will be safe in Winterfell and still have the ability to meet me in this realm. I will not tell you it will be easy or even lie about the danger of it.” His eyes found Bran. “If you choose to do this, you will be putting yourself into danger. It will not be simple and you will often become frustrated and discouraged. It is a thankless job and many will not understand the sacrifices you will make to ensure the survival of others. However, it is a very important job and a necessary one.”

Bran looked to Jon to tell him what to do but his brother merely shook his head.

“I love you very much Bran, but this is your life and you must make your own decisions,” he explained softly. “I do want you to understand that what happens in this realm affects your body in the real world. If you learn a skill here, your body will learn it as well.” That didn’t sound so bad? Perhaps he could finally be better at archery than Arya? “However,” Jon warned, forcing the boy to look at him. “This also means if you get hurt in this realm, your real body will be injured as well. I know this because I have experienced it. So if the Night King or any of his minions find you in this realm they will try to hurt you and most likely kill you. I am not trying to scare you, but I want you to understand the seriousness of this offer Lord Brynden is making you. If you choose to do this, you must take his teaching seriously, just as you would have to take Maester Luwin or Ser Rodrik seriously. This will be life and death, and not something to half-arse, you understand me?”

This is what Bran had always loved about Jon. He never sugar coated things and never treated him like an uneducated child because of his age. Instead he laid out the facts and let Bran make his decisions, for good or ill. He had faith in Bran that if he didn’t understand he would ask for clarification. Also, no matter what decision Bran made, he knew Jon would stand behind him one hundred percent.

“I think I do,” Bran admitted. “I can travel in spirit into animals, like Summer.” He looked to both men for clarification, earning nods. “This is why I ‘see’ things from their perspective or sometimes taste things they have eaten.” Again nods. “Since I can go into more than one kind of animal, it means my ability is stronger than others? Old Nan said some of the wildlings can warg, but only into one type of creature.” Here only Brynden nodded as Jon clearly didn’t know the answer. Jon never pretended to know if he didn’t, another thing Bran appreciated. “And this ability can help our family and the people of the north against this threat? The one Father and Robb are working to prepare for?” More nods. “But it’s dangerous because if I’m in one of the animals and get hurt I can get hurt, or if I’m like I am now, in the dream realm (?) and get hurt I can get hurt or even die in the real world?” Again nods.

Bran frowned in thought, running all the information over in his mind. Vaguely he felt Jon moving away from him to give him space. Jon always understood Bran needed time to think over important things, unlike Arya who just jumped to the first decision she made, or Rickon who simply did what he wanted, often being contrary to others just because he could.

Jon moved over to Brynden giving Bran the time he needed. Ghost and Summer both took up positions by his little brother, ready to protect him if need be.

“Uncle,” Jon greeted Brynden with more familiarity now.

“Nephew,” Brynden responded in kind, allowing a smile as he took in the boy. “I cannot tell you how happy I am to see more members of our house have survived. More importantly that those
members represent what Targaryens should be. Honorable, strong and humble. You do our family proud.”

Jon blushed at the compliment, still not very good at accepting such things. Still it left him feeling good that another prominent member of his family thought he was a good man. All he had wanted to be in his life was a good man, like his father Ned Stark.

“Is the Night King already on the move,” he continued, decided to not acknowledge the other’s comment. “Is there anything I can do to help prepare the north further?”

“He is, though not as fast as he has been,” Brynden assured the other. “His stunt to send one of his men after you cost him greatly. Thank the gods it did not succeed.” Brynden had cheered his nephew on as he watched the boy fight the blasted Walker. He was a good fighter, using moves he himself had employed years ago. “Thanks to your letters to Lord Stark, the Free Folk have been saved from a horrible fate, at least those that listened. Some are too stubborn, others believe they are safe because of deals made in the past.” His face twisted into a sneer of derision. How he hated Crastor. “I did wish to warn you personally though. The Night King is very aware of who you are and what your role is. He may try harder to reach you in this realm. Some places, like here are safe because the gods will it, but even they have their limits. You will need to be on guard while in this realm, lest he find you unawares.”

“I was afraid of that. I had hoped after the first time my ancestors dragged me off he would have no more thought of me, but after I faced the one Walker…” Jon sighed heavily running a hand over his face. “That one was hard enough to kill and really it was luck. I loath to think of how difficult HE will be to face.”

“You do not credit your skills enough,” Brynden chided. “However, you are also right to not take too much belief in your abilities. There is always someone better out there. That is why you must believe in the people you fight for. They will give you the strength you need to win.”

“If only it were as easy…”

“Great men are not molded by easy tasks,” Brynden informed him genially. “But also remember great men are not perfect, they fall many times, but what makes them great is they LEARN from their failures.”

“Then I feel I should be far wiser than I am,” Jon sassed earning a light bop to the head from his great-many times uncle. Soon though the light moment was broken. “Must Bran really be your successor?”

“Aye, he is the only one with the ability to fill my shoes, and more to the point he will become better,” Brynden stated surely.

“Is it because of your age,” Jon asked moderately. “Or because you do not expect to escape the Night King.”

Brynden eyed his nephew, impressed by how the child had deduced the truth of the matter. He did not see pity, only understanding and a sadness for the loss to come. “A little of both. I have been alive far longer than I should have been. I have served the realms as much as any man can. My time to rest is coming, however I want to make sure I leave the realms in good hands before I pass.”

“That is all anyone can do,” Jon murmured showing he truly understood.

“Indeed it is.”
The two stood in companionable silence for a time as young Bran stared at the Heart Tree. When he turned around both could see the determination in his Tully blue eyes.

“<span class="quote">I will do it,”</span> he stated as clearly and strongly as his young voice could. “I know it will not be easy, but this is important for everyone living that I try. I also know I might not always be good at what you teach, but I promise to give it my all and learn from my mistakes. I promise to be a diligent student. I am a Stark of Winterfell and it is our duty to protect the north. I will do all in my power to do so, because winter is coming.”
It had been a long time since Ser Arthur Dayne had set foot in his homeland. He had dreamed of how it might occur many times, but sailing with Prince Oberyn, Prince Aegon and Prince Jaehaerys, along with the Company of Roses, Ser Connington and his sister Ashara had not been one of them.

A moon had passed after Prince Oberyn had arrived unexpectedly, along with his cousin Aurane. Connington had been worried that this would show their hand too soon, and Aegon’s identity would be revealed to the usurper. Oberyn had disagreed, stating the fat oaf had far more problems on his hands, specifically the growing unrest in the kingdom due to the debt of the crown and his firstborn’s questionable sanity. The foolish boar and his overly arrogant wife clearly did not see any issues, but those in the game knew the undercurrents had shifted.

Connington had been able to get ahold of Varys, who was surprisingly on their side. Then again he remembered well how that man had his fingers in near every pot. How he wished the fool had realized Rhaeger would have been a better bet than Aerys. Though he could admit the man had been able to reign in a few of Aerys’ more perverse plans and outcries. In the end the old dragon was a force of nature all his own, and one could never truly stop a force of nature.

Still the spider had managed to get them some interesting information. While Lord Stark had indeed agreed to become the Hand of the king, it was very reluctantly. Furthermore he refused to betroth his daughter to the king’s son. This little tidbit had everyone raising brows. If even Robert’s most loyal friend would refuse the prince as a good-son, then perhaps the ‘rumors’ of his nature were not rumors. Stark was many things, but everyone through the kingdom agreed he protected his family much like the sigil of his house protected a pack. He would not have turned down such an ‘honor’ and incur the king’s wrath unless it was to protect his kin.

Arthur knew very well how far the man would go for kin. His violet eyes traced to where Aegon and Jaehaerys, or Jon as he preferred, were sparring in one of the private training grounds of the Martell home here in Sunspear. His heart swelled at the sight of Rhaeger’s two boys alive and well. He may not have liked the circumstances of Jon’s life in Winterfell, but at least Stark had cared more for family than friendship so Jon could even make it this far.

When Oz had first told him of the boy that so resembled their dead prince, he had almost dismissed him. Rhaegar had been Arthur’s best friend. They had squired together as boys and kept each other’s confidence. He was the one Rhaegar shared his fears with, from his father to the damned prophecy that haunted his every step in the later years of his life. Arthur had such high hopes for his friend. Then Harrenhall happened. Of all the things Arthur blamed the spider for, this one was the biggest. If only that fat eunuch had not whispered of plots into Aerys’ ear!

Then again, it was also where Rhaegar met Lyanna and Arthur saw his friend actually fall in love.

Of course at first he wanted to deck his friend for the insult to his wife, Arthur’s childhood friend Elia. However, Rhaegar and Elia had both been upfront in their marriage, both agreeing they were friends, but not truly in love. They had even agreed once Elia safely delivered his second child, she could have her own lovers, discreetly of course. It was better than most women got anywhere outside of Dorne. Truthfully, the princess would not be able to have any more children. She’d been lucky to bring Rhaenys and Aegon to term, not to mention the horrid miscarriages she’d had before and between them. Plus, Elia was no fool. She knew Rhaeger would need more children to secure his rule, especially with as mad as Aerys had become. Granted, she reserved the right to choose her sister-wife.
Imagine their surprise when she had come to them after the first day of the Mystery Knight’s appearance and told Rhaeger he would marry the Knight of the Laughing Tree. Arthur had thought maybe the heat of the day had finally gotten to her in her condition. Rhaeger had asked if she’d been drinking the hard liquor Oberyn had brought, as clearly he could not marry a man. She had simply laughed, in that clear bell-like way of hers and patted them both on their cheeks. The ten dragons she bet them both had been collected quite gleefully, when a shell-shocked Rhaegar had come back from hunting said knight not two days later.

Honestly how were they supposed to know women could joust like that?

The plan was hatched, the wooing began and time marched on. Everything seemed to be going perfectly, until they had learned Brandon Stark had not been given the message specifically sent for him. The message entrusted to the heir’s betrothed’s sister. At the time she had been keeping company with a Petyr Baelish, who later became Master of Coin. Arthur had not known the man, more a boy then, but something about him seemed off. He and Oz both believed that man had something to do with the misinformation the Northern Heir had received.

It might have been salvaged, but before Rhaeger could return to the Red Keep, Lord Stark had arrived and both he and his son murdered in a farce of a Trial by Combat. Then Aerys, in his madness had called for the heads of Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon. The rest is now left to the history books and very painful memories of those who survived.

When he and Oz had made for Essos, they had run into some of Varys’ birds. By then the Queen was dead in childbirth, and Viserys and his newborn sister had fled with Ser William Darry to Bravos and from their Pentos. With nowhere else to go, as neither man would ever kneel to Baratheon, they headed to Pentos to try and keep an eye on the last living Targaryens. By the time they managed to find the children, Darry was dead and Viserys was already showing his father’s madness. The boy had dismissed them in a fit of peak, declaring them traitors to his house for siding with his brother instead of protecting his father and himself, the ‘true’ king.

It had been a few dark years for both of the men after that. Riding from city to city, taking small jobs, then joining the Second Sons. It had seemed to Arthur the gods were punishing them for their failure, and nothing could ever redeem them.

Then Jon stumbled his way into their lives, a boy of two and ten facing the world on his own to escape the cruel bigotry bastards faced is Westeros. A tiny little waif with all of Lyanna’s coloring, but Rhaeger’s slim build and thoughtful gaze.

He didn’t know if it was the gods, or his friend’s spirit guiding the boy to them, but Arthur knew he’d been given a second chance to protect his friend’s child. He refused to fail this time.

Sure, there were several bumps in the road. That little trick to put them in Aegon’s path would not be forgotten for some time. Then the continued battle to overcome Jon’s low self-esteem, made all the harder by the discovery of his bearer status. Arthur admitted he had allowed himself to treat Jon differently once he found out, but that was due to years of training for the possibility of a bearer being in the royal line. Hells even Rhaeger talked about such things with such reverence that it seemed a sin to try and harm one such being in any way.

Jon had informed them otherwise quite succinctly with the way he finally let Connington have it. Granted the man had it coming more than the rest of them. Arthur may have become a bit more over protective but he sure as hells didn’t try and condescend Jon or his position. He knew Connington was just worried Jon would try to usurp Aegon, the boy he had raised all these years. Plus his jealousy over Rhaeger falling in love with Lyanna, instead of seeing how devoted Connington was to him, was a sore spot for the old knight. Really if the man would actually open his eyes and see Jon
for himself and not his parents he would easily see the boy would never even dream of such a thing. In fact, Jon seemed to abhor anything that required he be the center of attention, which was exactly what Aegon’s position would be. Plus, Jon resembled Rhaeger in the fact that once he had a mission, he followed it doggedly to the end.

Gods he wished it weren’t so. Especially not with the mission he seemed to think was his solemn duty.

A boy of barely five and ten should not have to worry about fighting the Night King and his army of dead. Yet that is exactly what Jon did, because he had seen and fought the true enemy of the realm and he refused to give in. Arthur had not wanted to believe him when he told them why he went to Valyria, but his inability to lie, Brynden Whitestark’s own version of the prophecy, and memories of Rhaeger’s prophecy made it so hard to not take the words as truth. The final nail in the coffin of doubt was Oberyn’s account of Jon’s battle with the Walker, which he’d witnessed along with several other people, thousands of miles away from where the fight took place.

Oberyn might have been a man of extremes, but he never exaggerated an enemy or a threat. The sheer amount of information he had gained from his journey to the North certainly lead to the credibility of this enemy.

Even worse, the rest of the realm didn’t either know or believe in it.

This would be a battle like no other, and they would need every available man to fight it. The petty Game of Thrones would need to be put aside for the best of humanity, yet the realist in him knew the nobles in the game could never do such a thing. Thankfully Stark had already begun preparation in the North and Jon had managed to procure not only a large cache of Valyrian steel weapons the Company was planning to take North to the Wall, but two viable dragon eggs, which the two brothers had hatched. No one could ever doubt the boy’s blood now.

There had been a few arguments that they were pressing too fast in taking the boys to Westeros. However, it was deemed strategically sound to get a foothold in now. Aurane had explained how many in the Crownlands were unhappy with Stannis Baratheon and his Red Witch. He was employing a ridiculous edict about religion, which actually stood against the very laws he claimed to protect. One could say many things about Aegon the Conqueror and his following heirs, but none could claim they were not tolerant of religion. It was probably one of the reasons the north assimilated so well into their kingdom, unlike when the Andals came trying to force their beliefs on the First Men. Stannis would find messing with peoples’ beliefs led to very grim consequences. The fact most of the Crownlands also happened to be loyalists only sweetened the pot.

The plan was to quietly appropriate Dragonstone. As Stannis was on the outs with his brother quite frequently this would not be too difficult to keep hidden for a time. Oberyn and Whitestark would go to the Capital to speak to Stark; they would try to get him and his family out sooner rather than later. Stark may be loyal to Baratheon, but his true duty was to the North and they needed him if they were going to face the Night King. His son Robb was young, and still trying to undo the damage to his reputation he had caused with his treatment of Jon.

Oberyn had stated the boy had seemed very remorseful of his prior treatment, but Arthur didn’t blame Jon for taking that with a grain of salt. Wounds caused by family were the longest to fester and the hardest to heal. Robb Stark would have a very long way to go to earn Jon’s forgiveness, and that was if he earned the right to speak to the boy. Jon had many people in his corner, even if he didn’t think he deserved them.

Regardless it was agreed that the Warden of the North was the best person to have in Winterfell during this time. The Free Folk respected his position and willing worked with him, and his lords
would stand by him in a heartbeat. There were reasons the Starks were the longest ruling family in all of Westeros.

For now the plan was to have as quiet a coup as possible. Baratheon did not seem long for the world, between his atrocious health habits and his wife. The little tid-bit about his children not actually being his children would also come in handy. It would certainly help in removing them from the line of succession, though Renly Baratheon might give issue, but a simple King’s Moot could easily quiet him.

The hard part was keeping Jon calm and patient. Apparently he had met with some ‘seer’ who told him his family in the capitol were in danger. Arthur snorted. He didn’t need a seer to know that; the capitol was one of the worst places for anyone to be, but more so for honorable people like Stark. At the very least they knew Cersei was going to make her move against Baratheon soon. Arthur was surprised it took this long. Even as a young girl he could see she was a conniving bitch. It was the main reason Elia had vetoed her as Rhaeger’s second bride right off. She had also commented that there was something not right about the young lioness, though she couldn’t quite put it into words.

Of course some of the information the spider managed to slip them gave light to just what that wrongness was. The woman had apparently managed to cockhold Baratheon with her own twin brother. Part of him applauded the wench for her ability to pull it off for so long.

The other part was so disappointed in the promising young man he had once squired. Jamie truly had the potential to be an exceptional knight, yet Aerys’ cruel appointment of the boy to the Kingsguard and his ultimate betrayal of said king had taken the boy onto a dark path. He knew Jamie would not have betrayed Aerys unless it was very important; the boy was too honorable, at least at the time. Those he loved also easily manipulated him; a trait Gerold and the rest of them had tried to work out of him. Sadly it seemed the boy was now a lost cause, his sister having dug her claws in deep.

Ghost broke him from his thoughts by flopping over his lap in a rather dramatic fashion. He chuckled and scratched at the great beast’s ear. The wolf had grown rapidly in the time he’d known him. Already he was bigger than any hound he’d ever seen, and the mutt would only grow bigger. Oberyn had stated the direwolf Stark had came up near to his shoulder! After seeing some of the full-grown wolves the company kept, he didn’t doubt it.

“Jedar bothering you again boy,” he asked sympathetically. The dragon had also grown, now matching Ghost in size, if one did not count the wingspan. It would be a few more years before the two dragons were of a size the boys could ride them properly, but they had already proven deadly with their fire. While he knew the wolf and the dragon got on, mainly due to their love for Jon, they also had a sibling-like rivalry that was entertaining to watch.

Ghost huffed and rolled, silently telling him where he needed to scratch. Arthur chuckled in amusement. He was still surprised at how connected Jon was with his wolf and his dragon. There were stories of first men who’d been able to warg, or skin change, but he’d never seen anything to suggest it held any truth. Now he wondered. He was pretty sure Jon’s connection was much deeper than he spoke of. In fact, sometimes if he wanted to know what Jon was really feeling, he only needed to look to Ghost or Jedar. For all the boy was open and honest he could hide his true feelings like an expert. However, if Ghost and Jedar were unhappy or snappy then you can bet Jon felt the same. It aided him more than once when gauging the youngest prince’s mood. It was how he realized how anxious the boy was when they made it to Dorne.

He himself had been anxious and more than a little worried. Oberyn had hinted to him just how well Andric and Allaria had taken the news of his survival. While he knew his siblings would rejoice in his continued existence he held no allusion to their ire at his silence of the fact all these years.
Thankfully Ashara faced the same problem, so if he played it right, he could shift most of their ire to her.

Suddenly Ghost’s head popped up and he looked to where Jon and Aegon were standing, both trying to catch their breath after their latest spar. Since the wolf wasn’t tense Arthur allowed himself to relax. Instead he got a good laugh as Oberyn’s daughters surrounded the boys, dragging them down into a pile of hugs and tickles. Well, all of them but Obara, she just watched with an amused smirk.

“Not going to save your master then,” Arthur queried only to have Ghost send him a bored look before settling back into place, clearly not bothered.

Arthur just chuckled again allowing himself to lean back and watch the boys behave like children. He had learned long ago to enjoy the moments of peace, for they rarely lasted.
chapter 56 Jon

Jon gasped as he woke from his latest dream. Cold sweat covered his body despite the heat drifting in from the balcony doors. Dorne was dreadfully hot, much like Essos. It had forced Jon to dress in more of the local fashion, which was far more scandalous than even some of what he’d seen in Essos. He had blushed crimson when Oberyn’s older daughters had teased him the first time he worn the clothes Ellaria laid out for him, his chest displayed in such a way he wondered why he even wore a shirt. Aegon had a wonderful time joining in, as he had far less modesty so had no issues accepting the compliments women sent his way. Granted he had ‘casually’ threatened everyone away from Jon, his violet eyes warning of the harm he could cause if they dismissed his words.

While he would argue he was not a damsel in distress, it was nice having an older brother who was protective of him. He vaguely remembered Robb being such when they were very young, before the damned squid came into their lives. Sadly even Aegon could not protect him when he slept.

When he and Aegon had finally met up again, his ancestors had told him to explain his dreams to Aegon. Then they directed Jon to do a ritual to help his brother join in his dreams, so he too could receive the teachings of his ancestors. Apparently it was Jon’s First Men blood that held the magic to traverse the dream realms. Aegon had some as well, but not nearly as strong, so Jon would have to help him. The first time they entered a dream together had been quite fun for Jon. Aegon’s reaction had given him great ammunition to tease the other boy with. That night Jon had spent time with his Stark relatives, to allow Aegon to experience the full attention of their Targaryen ancestors. He particularly enjoyed Visenya’s way of initiating Aegon to the Targaryen fighting styles.

He was entitled; he had suffered just as much!

Now most nights the brothers would spend time training with their ancestors, including the new addition of Martell ancestors. Their familiars would also join, the two dragons spending a lot of time with Balerion, usually crawling over the giant dragon to use him as a launch point to learn to fly.

Sometimes though, Jon did not end up where their ancestors waited for them. Sometimes, just as he drifted to sleep, he’d feel a strong pull and he’d find himself in a darker realm. He knew the Night King was trying to find him. Each time he fought, focusing on the God’s Wood or even on Aegon to take him away from the enemy. Each time it happened, the cold would grow worse, indicating to Jon that the Night King was growing stronger.

It frightened him more than it should, especially the looks his ancestors would give when he did manage to appear in front of them after breaking away. Aegon simply thought it took him longer to fall asleep. As of yet he had not dissuaded him of that thought. He did not want to worry his brother, and his ancestors thankfully kept quiet on the subject. More than once Bran the Builder had taken him aside on those nights, teaching him more about warging and the magic of the First Men. It had helped greatly, but the struggle still continued.

Sometimes, like tonight, he didn’t go anywhere else in the dream realm when he broke free; he simply woke up. The feeling of deep cold settled in his blood, fear lingering with it. Sliding from the bed without disturbing Ghost or Jedar, both who refused to allow him to enjoy a soft bed on his own, he walked to the balcony of his room. It was still dark out, but sunrise was not far off. There was a warm breeze that cooled the sweat on his skin, yet failed to warm him as he wished.

This trip had been different than the others. It started in total darkness, like always. Yet this time the cold was blistering. Icy wind stung his exposed skin, and he swore his feet were sinking into deep snow. He remembered the feeling well from the few summer snows he experienced as a child,
however this snow was deeper, colder. It also gripped at his legs like mud, as if to drag him down into its chilling grip. Each step he made became more difficult, his muscles slowly seizing from the sheer cold of the air. The fear grew worse as his body slowly started to shut down.

Uncle Benjen had told him of such things happening to men and women beyond the Wall. Temperatures so low that a person slowly froze to death, unable to stall the Stranger’s hand because their body refused to respond. It was a slow death, often painful, the cold biting as much as a fire could yet one could not simply douse it. The body became so sluggish that the will and ability to fight simply drained from a person.

It was this more than anything that scared him.

The moment he picked up a sword he learned that he could easily die by it. Death was inevitable regardless. It was how one lived their life that truly mattered. However, the idea that his enemy could simply steal the will to live and fight from him bothered him more than anything. The thought his enemy could simply break him like that, left him shaking far more than any night terror he had as a child.

He had suffered many things in his short life, but no one, not Robb, not Theon, not even Lady Stark had broken his spirit. While he may not have fought against them openly, he still found a way to fight, to survive. His soul was bruised and slightly cracked, but never broken to the point he would give up.

So he had continued to struggle, despite the snow pulling him down, to the point he couldn’t lift his legs any higher. He tried digging his way through, refusing to give into the harsh winds whispering for him to let go. Just as he managed to force the panic away and start focusing on his lessons to break free of this encounter something grabbed his neck. It was strong and so, so cold. Just the barest of touches, before Jon was forced into the waking world. He shuddered to think of what would have happened had he been unable to wake up.

Still shaky and well aware he’d never get back to sleep now, he dressed quickly and headed out. He left the door slightly ajar so Ghost and Jedar could get out once they finally woke up. He was glad they never experienced these dreams, he dreaded to think what they would do if they had.

He made his way down to the gardens, nodding to the guards or servants he saw along the way. He treated everyone with respect because he believed it was the right thing to do. Still, he might have over done it a bit here because he was so nervous. Regardless of Aegon being his brother, or Oberyn liking him, he still understood that many people in Dorne blamed his mother for the war. In a way they were correct. Had his parents been more careful in who they trusted, or simply TOLD the right people the truth, perhaps it all could have been avoided. So many people lost…

Logically he knew it was not completely their fault, there were many factors that caused the war. Mainly King Aerys’ growing madness and foolish handling of his people. A war would have come about at some point; it was simply a matter of when and how.

So unless he was with Aegon or the others he kept to himself and stayed scarce, much as he had in Winterfell.

He didn’t know that the people of Dorne knew what he had gone through in Winterfell after it became common knowledge of Robb’s punishment. He had gained their respect for taking the high road and searching out a better life. They also knew of his actions in saving one of Prince Oberyn’s daughters, and his respectful treatment of the family during their time in Volantis. Had he known he would have said Prince Oberyn was exaggerating, but the knowledge came from the servants and guards that had travelled with the prince, not from the man him self. They also knew he was the one
to send the Company’s healer, a man whose mother was from Yi Ti and an herbalist that passed her knowledge onto her son. He specialized in all sorts of illnesses including gout, which had plagued Prince Doran for years. The healer had confirmed Jon hadn’t wanted to seem impertinent and suggest his services himself, but also did not want his brother’s uncle to suffer when there was a treatment that could help him. What they really respected was the boy had not once brought it up or tried to gain anything from it.

Really Jon had very little to worry about in regard to the people of Dorne, they had come to respect him for his own merit. His fighting skills and aptitude for taking all fighters seriously, regardless of gender, only increased their esteem. So every nod or smile he gave as he walked down the hallway was returned with honest fervor.

Usually he would have either Arthur, Oz or Duck, who’d been inducted to the Kingsguard, trailing him, but Arthur was spending time with his recently arrived family, Oz was healing from a training mishap and Duck was likely guarding Aegon. Jon actually preferred it this way. Truly he appreciated the knights and their attempts to keep him safe, yet after so long of having to look after himself, both in Winterfell and in Essos having a guard trailing him got old. Even knowing he was not actually a bastard but a prince didn’t stop him from disliking having a shadow ALL THE TIME! Even in Winterfell the guards only followed the children when they left the Keep, not inside it.

When he finally made it to the gardens the sun had started to lighten the sky. Already he could see the pinks and oranges of the rising sun on the horizon. The gardens here were full of smells and colors Jon had not seen before. Sometimes the smell was overwhelming, especially after he’d shortly warged into Ghost or Jedar. It didn’t happen often, and usually only when he was asleep, still some of their senses would transfer over for a bit once he was back to himself. The first few times were very disorienting.

Off to the side he heard sniffling, a sound he had familiarity with. As a big brother it was engrained in him to investigate anytime he heard such noises. Sure enough his search found a young boy curled up under a tree well hidden by strategically placed bushes. Carefully he slipped through the foliage and simply sat next to the child. From what he could tell it was Prince Tristan, prince Doran’s youngest son.

He had met the child when he arrived in Sunspear, along with his elder sister and brother. From what he knew the boy was third in line for the throne of Dorne and was squiring for Ser Damien Sand here in Sunspear. Jon had not spent much time with him, as he had not wanted to intrude on Aegon’s time getting to know his mother’s family.

He didn’t say anything simply held out the cloth he always carried with him lately to help wipe away sweat. Really, heat like this should be a crime. Tristan startled a bit, but soon enough took the cloth with a small thank you, keeping his face turned away, no doubt embarrassed to be found crying. Jon made no comment on it, knowing how his younger siblings would have taken any such words, especially Arya. Even now he could feel the phantom pains of one of her punches.

“Are you going to tell the others that the third prince is not just a failure but a crybaby too,” he finally spoke, his words bitter and full of hurt.

It reminded Jon strongly of the times Arya and Bran both doubted their places for different reasons. Being a younger child of a high lord’s household was more difficult than most knew. There was so much to live up too, not just the legacy but the elder siblings and their accomplishments as well.

“There would be nothing to say as you are neither,” Jon replied casually, making sure to not show any pity or condescension.

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“That’s not what everyone else thinks,” the boy muttered petulantly.

Jon just waited patiently; knowing that pushing the subject would not help. Sure enough the boy cracked.

“I’m just the spare of the spare and I can’t even do that right,” he cried in frustration. “Arianne is better at sums and history and Quentin is one of the best in the joust and even the melee. I try to be like them, but numbers don’t make sense to me and I’m horrible with the lance and hardly any better with a sword. Even the spear is difficult and I’m a Prince of Dorne, where spear fighting is practically bred into us,” he nearly wailed in despair. “Every time I turn around I keep hearing about the things Arianne has done or a new move Quentin has mastered and I feel like I will never be any good…”

“That is because you are not Arianne or Quentin,” Jon stated calmly, ignoring the hurt look the boy sent him. “You are Tristan Martell, you are your own person with your own strengths. You just have not found them yet, and you will not if you keep trying to be someone else.” The boy blinked somewhat confused so Jon continued. “I have many younger siblings. I know,” he interrupted before Tristan could question him. “They are in actuality my cousins, but to me I only knew them as my younger siblings, if half-siblings, but I will always consider them my brothers and sisters. Sansa didn’t need me much, as the eldest girl, but Bran and Arya were at the age where they started to realize how much pressure they had on them to be like their older siblings or better,” Jon explained gently. “Bran is very smart, but not so gifted in weapons. In the North, all of the Stark boys are expected to be proficient in arms; it is part of the Northern way. Bran was so discouraged that he tried constantly to be like Robb, who was very good with a sword, and even myself. I found him often in the Gods Wood upset that he would never be good enough. He was worried that he would have no place in the North if he didn’t measure up to us. He was especially worried that he would never make his parents proud of him.” He noticed the way Tristan’s eyes widened, knowing he hit the real reason for his troubles on the nose. “But I will tell you what I told him. His parents are already proud of him. They love him and they just want him to be happy. He is still young and they know he will find his place in the world in time, just as you will find your place.” He knew he had the boy’s full attention as he turned to him hanging on every word. “Like Bran you don’t need to be anyone but yourself. Your family just wants you to be the best Tristan Martell you can be. If you don’t have the same strengths or talents as your siblings that’s okay. You have your own strengths, and I dare say those strengths are there to help counter any weaknesses your siblings have.”

Here the prince snorted in disbelief.

“I can see you question the idea. So I shall give you the best example,” Jon paused drawing it out. “Prince Doran and Prince Oberyn.”

“What,” Tristan gasped in shock. “But… but they don’t have any weaknesses!”

“All men have weaknesses,” Jon cautioned. “Prince Doran is a very patient man, he thinks before he acts and he employs caution, but this can also be a problem if one does not act quickly enough for certain problems. Prince Oberyn is often impatient and jumps before he looks, however sometimes this can be a boon, as striking before your enemy can often secure the win.” Jon let him think about that for a moment. “The most important thing is they balance each other out. They know and acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, so they can work together to utilize their knowledge and abilities to protect their family and Dorne.”

Tristan sat silently for a moment clearly trying to absorb what Jon said. He let the other boy do so, perfectly content to sit quietly.

“But,” Tristan mumbled timidly. “How do I find what I’m good at?”
“You experiment,” Jon supplied easily. “With studies, if there is a subject you want to learn more about, or interests you, look into it. I have heard you are very good with languages. If you enjoy it, perhaps look into learning more. As for weapons, it is best to go through the various weapons to see which one feels good in your hands.” Jon let a rueful smile take over. “I remember my Master at Arms had us do that after we learned the basic forms. I was so upset to learn my best weapon was a bastard sword. I thought it was the gods’ way of cementing the fact I was never going to be more than I was. For a time I even refused to use that type of blade, but I have come to accept it is my best weapon.”

“My teacher never had us try other weapons,” Tristan murmured thoughtfully. “It’s always been accepted that you learn the sword, lance and spear. I tried to use them, but none of them seemed… right?”

“Well, I do not know your teacher, but I feel he has done you a disservice. If those were the only ‘accepted’ fighting styles there would not be the sheer number of different weapons in the world, or even in the armory,” Jon gently informed him. “I may not be able to help with everything else, but perhaps I can help you try out the different weapons until you find one that feels right to you?”

Tristan perked up, nearly hopping to his feet. “Truly? You would do that?”

“Of course,” Jon assured him as he too stood, dusty the dirt from his breeches. “And as it is so early I doubt there will be many people in the armory giving us ample time to explore. Unless you have duties you need to tend to soon?”

The words barely left his mouth as the young prince grabbed his arm and started pulling him to the training field and armory. Already he was jabbering about the different weapons he saw and trying to guess which might suit him. Neither boy saw the shadow of Tristan’s guard move to follow them, keeping a discrete distance.

Once in the yard Jon had Tristan dress in the light training armor and then one by one handed him different weapons, telling him to hold it, swing it and see if he felt comfortable with them. Most swords were out, though he did well with long knives. The axe was vetoed as were the flails, war hammers and spears.

Tristan let his shoulders fall. “I told you, none of them feel right.”

“True, but you didn’t look half bad with the spear,” Jon murmured. “In fact, I think you’d be good with a halberd, or perhaps even a glaive…”

“What is the difference,” Tristan asked, scrunching his nose in confusion.

Jon pulled out one of each weapon, though admittedly it had been difficult to find them. Apparently they were not often used, if at all. “A halberd is a combination of a spear with an axe. It allows for the reach and stabbing of a spear, but has the added weight for powerful swings needed for an axe. The Glaive, is more like a long knife with a really long handle. Like a halberd the added weight allows for more power on the swings, though slightly more limited on the stabbing,” he explained from what he knew. “I know from an old comrade that the glaive is used more often in Yi Ti. I do not know much about either weapon, so we would need to try and find someone familiar with them to help train you if you like them.”

He had Tristan try each one, noting that though he tried to hold both like a spear, he did seem to have an easier time of it.

“They… they feel good,” Tristan murmured.
“But?”

“But they are so similar to a spear, how come I do not find a spear so easy to use?”

“Because the spear has a vastly different balance.”

Both boys jumped at the sound, turning to find Prince Doran and his guard, Aero Hotah. The prince was walking today instead of using his wheeled chair. True he had a cane, but it was clear to see the treatments he had been taking have helped greatly with his affliction.

“All weapons have specific points where it is balanced,” the man continued explaining, ignoring the way both boys looked like he’d caught them pilfering the kitchens. “This balance then determines how a weapon is best used, as well as gives a warrior an idea of the best weapon for them. Each person has their own center of balance, a weapon can throw that off, but the right one simply... fits. I had wondered if perhaps this was why you had so much trouble with the other weapons you have trained with in the past,” he told his son kindly. “You take more after your mother, and as such your center of balance is likely not apt to the weapons normally employed here. That is not a bad thing,” he assured his son quickly when he saw him starting to shy away. “In fact, having an unusual weapon can give a warrior an advantage, so long as he or she know how to wield it to the fullest extent.”

“But... how will I learn to use it if it is so rare, no one else knows either,” the child queried, nibbling his lip with worry. He had yet to relinquish the halberd, enjoying the way it felt in his hands.

“Well if memory serves, Aero here does know the basics of such weapons,” his father informed him wryly, the tall guard simply nodding in confirmation. “I also seem to remember several members of your mother’s family employing such weapons, quite skillfully. Perhaps a letter to them would yield us a fine teacher?”

“Really?” Tristan was practically vibrating with excitement. “And it’s truly okay for me to use a non-conventional weapon?”

“Of course,” Doran chuckled ruffling his son’s wild locks. “I just want you to try your best. You still have to train with other weapons,” he cautioned. “For you cannot defend against a weapon you do not know. Besides your grandfather will be overjoyed that you have taken after your mother’s side.”

“Knowing our luck he will send that insufferable know-it-all.” The group turned to find Oberyn entering the training field dressed for sparring. Obara was with him, her own sparring clothes and weapon in place.

“Now, now, Pablos is a very talented warrior,” Doran chided his brother playfully. “It is not his fault you two are so alike you cannot stand one another.”

“Excuse me,” Oberyn cried indignantly. “I am nothing like that arrogant braggart!”

Several snorts of disbelief were heard, causing the man to huff and pout.

“Traitors all of you.”

“It’s not always about you father,” Tyene teased playfully, grinning when Jon jumped at her sudden presence beside him. Why she loved to sneak up on him he did not know. Though he hoped Arya never met her or her sisters. If she did, Jon would be doomed!

The girl draped herself over Jon’s shoulders, letting him hold her weight, one hand drifting to play with his hair. He could tell by the heat in his cheeks he was blushing. The grins everyone else wore
also gave it away. Oberyn’s daughters were pure evil! They couldn’t go one day without trying to embarrass him in some way.

“It should always be about me,” the prince declared self-importantly, earning laughs from those in the yard.

Obara rolled her eyes at her father before giving her cousin a companionable pat on his shoulder. “Congrats on finding your weapon, cousin. You better work hard to master it.”

“I will!”

“Jon,” Tyene murmured next to him breaking his gaze from the family to her own worried blue orbs. She was staring at the neck line of his tunic. “What happened to your neck?”

“Wha…” Jon blinked in confusion not knowing what she was talking about. His hand reached up unconsciously only to wince when his fingers brushed the tender skin that felt far colder than it should have.

Within seconds Oberyn was next to him, pulling the shirt away to get a good look. His curses indicated it was not good.

“What is it, has someone attacked him,” Doran demanded, angry at the thought.

“It looks like someone grabbed him by the neck from the bruising,” Oberyn stated, trained eyes taking in the damage. “Yet, I would swear he also has a form of mild frost bite…”

Jon stilled at the realization. Surely it could be from his encounter in his dream? The Night King had barely touched him and he had not seen anything when he dressed to leave, so how?

“It wasn’t there earlier,” Tristan informed them, worried for his new friend.

“It’s getting darker,” Tyene warned, her own eyes locked on the darkening bruise. Her fingers brushed the area gently, pulling back immediately. “It’s cold too, like he’s been in freezing temperatures.”

“But… the dream… it was hours ago,” Jon whispered in despair, only now starting to feel the burning pain of the cold damage and the soreness around his throat.

“A dream,” Doran queried thoughtfully, his eyes catching his brothers. “I think this might be a matter for the mystics.”

“You are right,” Oberyn hummed. He then grabbed Jon’s arm and started to drag him off. “In the mean time I will treat the wound as one would any frost bite, hopefully that will slow down the spread.”

Jon let himself be pulled away, trying hard not to grimace. He hadn’t wanted to burden anyone with his dreams. Now it seemed like he would be sharing more than he thought. He just knew Oz and Art were going to ground him again.
Cersei threw her goblet into the fireplace of her room, which was more ornamental than functional as Winter temperatures rarely affected King’s Landing. Still the sound of the goblet clanging loudly against the carved marble made her feel slightly better.

How dare those Stark come into her city, her home and not even show her or her children the adoration and worship they deserved? She knew Robert asking that Northern friend of his to be Hand would be foolish and unhelpful, especially for her plans. After all the north was full of nothing but barbarians who wouldn’t know sophistication if it bit them on the ass. Still, at least he was an honest fool, which was far easier to manipulate than a dishonest one.

So, they had traveled north and she’d been prepared for the drab and plebian home of the Warden of the North and all his dower, insignificant people. Only it wasn’t anything like she’d assumed. Winterfell was on par with the Red Keep, if not bigger in acreage. Sure, it had no real ornamentation that one often found in the south, however she had learned from her father about fortifications alongside her precious Jamie. As such she knew just by looking at it, that Winterfell was not a Keep that would fall easily, if at all.

More surprising was how clean it was. Everything looked as if it had been updated, especially the roads. Everything she had heard about the north told her it was rough and nearly wild with little to no infrastructure. The roads were horrid making travel time consuming and unsafe, the fashion was plain, and the people even duller. Though some of that she found true, the North clearly had more going for it that rumors and past knowledge had indicated. The glass gardens in Winterfell surpassed any gardens she had seen north of the Crownlands, even if most of it was food.

No, the North was far more structured that she had been told, which meant there was money involved. A lot of money too, from the looks of the refurbishments.

As a Lannister, she knew how much money made the world go around. Therefore, she didn’t put up too much protest when Robert announced he was going to ask Stark to betroth his eldest daughter to her precious Joff. Of course, no girl would ever be good enough for her baby, but at least the girl was pretty enough and she could probably mold her into the perfect wife for her son. After all, there was no way these northern children were anywhere clever enough to avoid her manipulations.

Then Stark rejected Robert’s proposal. He denied HER son the right to wed his daughter. As if his daughter was BETTER than HER son! Oh, how she seethed with anger. Who did that upstart think he was to deny Joffrey? Even worse the little twit of a girl didn’t even seem heartbroken as she should have been! No, she actually looked relieved! Who in their right mind didn’t want to be wed to the crown prince? That was one step away from being queen!

‘There will come a queen, younger and more beautiful…’

NO! She shook the thought from her head. That had nothing to do with this! This was about the damned Starks rejecting HER son, as if he was some two-bit peasant!

Now it was a matter of pride. She would get them to want Sansa to marry Joffrey then deny them as they had denied her boy. She would have them drowning in disgrace for this offense. So, she set to work on the girl, trying to reel her in to her side.

Only the girl did not take the bait! How in the Seven Hells did a girl of barely three and ten, a girl from the barbaric north, have more sense that the majority of the noble women in the south? She
wasn’t even playing the Game! She simply didn’t bother with it, which was unfathomable! Granted she hadn’t expected the girl to know enough to play, given her parents and her likely education. The North was not known to play the Game, too honorable and straightforward. But this little dove certainly worked to keep herself out of Cersei’s clutches and away from even the other influential women of the court.

No matter how often she had her to tea, or a meal, or any number of gatherings with her ladies, the girl was polite and kind, but she never once let herself be caught. It was so infuriating! Every time Cersei brought up Joffrey, Sansa would never join in singing his praises as she should and not once showed an interest in him, even when she hinted that other ladies were interested. She merely demurred or changed the subject.

Those bloody wolves thought they were above the lions! How dare they!

“While I do so love how ravishing you look when angry, your eyes glow just so temptingly, I do wonder what has you doing so on this lovely day?”

She turned to find her twin, the other half of her soul leaning against the door frame to her chambers. His white cloak as pristine as always, his hair the envy of many men in the city. He was so beautiful, her Jamie. Her equal in nearly every way.

Now if only he’d take things more seriously.

“Surely you are not still upset about Stark’s brat,” he asked, snickering when she glowered at him. “Still not falling for our dear crown prince I see.”

“Why are you being so blasé about this,” she growled. “She is rejecting our son!”

“Your son,” he corrected. “I am not allowed to be his father remember? If I had been perhaps he’d have a bit more manners.”

“You know why you cannot claim him openly,” she hissed, eyes going to the doorway to make sure no one was about. This place had more ears than any other Keep in Westeros.

“Look, you knew Stark wasn’t going to want to betroth his child to anyone with Lannister blood, even if the child is also his best friend’s supposed son. Likely his daughter is doing her best to follow his lead,” he informed her, moving to rub his hands along her arms in a comforting fashion. “After all, Starks seem to be bred loyal.”

“Regardless, she should be upset about it, not looking as if the gods had smiled upon her for not allowing their union,” Cersei snarled, the insult still burning her.

“Then make it so she can’t marry anyone above a second son, or a landed knight,” he suggested with a roll of his eyes. “If they can’t see the benefit of marrying Joffrey, then we don’t want them to.”

“Of course, I don’t want that harlot marrying my son,” she huffed, stepping away from him. “But her family controls the largest portion of Westeros, and they apparently have more funds than we originally thought. You must have seen the new roads and how clean the Keeps were to and from Winterfell.”

“They are also strengthening all of their fortifications,” he stated with a shrug. “No doubt preparing for the ever-coming winter.”

Cersei however just stared at him, her mind whirling. Was the north preparing to leave the kingdom? Were they planning a rebellion, is that why they refused the betrothal? But Eddard Stark was
Robert’s best friend. He helped win a rebellion for him, in fact had he not had the north behind him, Robert would have been crushed even with the Vale. However, it was also no secret how much Stark disliked the Lannisters, as if the mangy wolf had the right to judge the noble lions. So, is he just waiting for Robert to die to secede from the kingdom?

“Whatever you are thinking, it is likely not even close to the truth,” Jamie assured her.

“How can you be so sure? Stark has been cold to Robert since the rebellion, after father presented Robert with the bodies of the Targaryen scum and the Dornish whore,” she stated curtly, remembering the rants her ‘husband’ went on about the man. “And while he came when called during the Greyjoy rebellion, there was still a coldness to how he treated Robert. Even now he treats being here as a chore instead of an honor…”

“That’s because being the Hand of the king IS a chore,” her brother reminded her. “Especially when that king is Robert. Any fool but Robert could see Stark didn’t want to come down here, his mind is on other things and he hates the capitol. Not that I blame him. Likely he only came down here to find out what happened to Jon Arryn. The man practically raised him after all.”

“Yes,” she muttered, eyes narrowed in thought. “And what is he learning?”

“He seems to be re-tracing the old man’s steps though he’s not putting any pieces together,” Jamie scoffed. “Likely too honorable to see what’s right in front of him.”

“And if he does see it,” she challenged, nostrils flaring at the thought of a threat to their children.

“He won’t,” Jamie assured her. “We’ll just put a few obstacles in his way or force him to deal with running the kingdom to force his attention elsewhere, at least until Robert… passes. Besides, it’s not as if we had anything to do with Arryn’s death. Just a fortuitously timed illness.”

“Again, your inability to take this seriously is most vexing,” she sneered. “While I agree his death was timed well, it is rather suspicious given what he was looking into. So, I think it might be best to have something else take the Hand’s attention and then quietly get rid of any evidence Robert so thoroughly spread around in King’s Landing.”

Jamie glanced at her sharply. “Most of them are innocent children.”

Cersei snorted derisively. “They are bastards, the Seven define them as being living sins. We are simply helping them atone.”

Jamie clenched his jaw, disliking this plan but unwilling to go against his love. “And how will we keep the Hand busy elsewhere?”

A sly smile twisted her pretty lips. “The Mountain has been restless lately. Perhaps he could use some time in the Riverlands… We can’t always control the bannermen after all, not even father.”

“He will be furious if you lose him one of his better weapons,” Jamie warned.

“The loss of one man is nothing in the face of possibly having the truth come to light,” Cersei stated coldly. “Besides. I AM the queen.”
Jon couldn’t quell the anxiety swelling in his stomach as the ship grew closer to King’s Landing. It was decided that Aegon and Connington as well as several Dornishmen, would meet up with the Gold Company and attack Dragonstone. Aurane would go with them, his ship acting as a disguise to get them in without alerting anyone to the invasion. Hopefully they would be able to take it over quietly, then gather the Crownlands to Aegon’s cause, which likely would prove easy as they had remained loyal to the Targaryens. Given some of the additional rumors they had heard about Stannis and his red witch, the people would be more than glad for a change in regime.

It was, however, firmly decided that nothing would happen to Stannis’ daughter. She was an innocent and neither Jon nor Aegon would allow innocents to be hurt, not like their sister had been. They would prove they were better than the Lannisters and their dogs.

Obara and Nymeria had gone with Aegon to represent their family, while Oberyn and Tyene had joined Jon and the Company of Roses in their quest to get the Warden of the North and his people out of the snake pit. Oberyn had been known to go to the Red Keep, so he would be able to slip Whitestark in easily enough to see the Hand. Their spy, Varys would also help where he could, leading some of the men through the tunnels, but he could only do so much without showing his true alliances. They would need a man on the inside in the months to come.

The Kingsguards had split up with Arthur and Duck following Aegon and Oswell keeping Jon in line. Duck would always be loyal to Aegon first and Arthur was too distinctive. Oswell, though known was not as well remembered, much to his chagrin, so it would be easier for him to slip about the city. Jon thought he’d be happier since it meant he could go gossip to his heart’s content without anyone the wiser. When he said as such he earned an additional hour of sword lessons.

It would take them a fortnight to get to King’s Landing. Already Jon was missing Jedar. He’d had his dragon go with Aegon to help protect him, as he was bigger than Perzys, and so he would remain secret still. Ghost could stay with him as Direwolves were known in Westeros. They were unusual but not as much as a dragon was. He could still feel his connection though, and he joined his dragon in his dreams to help ease the separation.

For most of the day he helped around the ship or completed training to Oswell’s standards. He was glad for the work, it helped take his mind off his worry for his family in King’s Landing. It also helped keep his mind off the letters in his pack.

Obaryn had handed him the letters shortly after he’d found them with the Company. He was surprised but thankful to receive the missives from home. Arya, Bran and Rickon had written, as well as Lord Stark. He’d been shocked though at the additional three letters inside, one each from Sansa, Robb and Lady Catelyn.

Aegon had tried to snatch the letters several times after he saw the look on Jon’s face, but he managed to thwart his brother. His brother was also put out that Jon would not share them until after he had read them himself, in private. So far, he’d read the first four.

Arya and Bran had both scolded him for leaving without saying goodbye, though they had understood his reasoning. Both of them then rambled on in their own unique ways telling him how their lives had been since he left Winterfell. Bran told his story in a basic timeline with random observations and facts sprouted throughout. Arya… Arya was all over the place, though he could admit her writing was much improved. Still, sometimes it was a challenge to read her letter because subjects often jumped back and forth or changed entirely. Rickon’s was far more basic, but no less
appreciated. His littlest brother had been so young when he left, Jon was sure he would forget him. However, the young wolf clearly remembered Jon and the stories he would tell, and already demanded he come home and tell him more stories. He especially seemed interested in learning more about the animals in Essos.

The main theme in all of the letters was that they missed him and loved him. It left a warm feeling in Jon’s heart and he would admit to reading those letters several times over.

His father’s letter was harder for him, yet he wanted to see if he mentioned what preparations had been completed in the north. Still, it took him much longer to work up the courage to read it. Much like his siblings, his father spent the first page scolding him for leaving the safety of Winterfell. While the younger Starks were simply miffed he’d left, his father had worried about the trouble he could have gotten into (as well as the trouble he actually did get into) and the possibility of his injury or death. He then went on to say he understood and even more surprising, he apologized for not seeing what was in front of him. Jon had not held his treatment against his father, he knew the man was extremely busy running the North. That portion of the kingdom was huge and, quite frankly, the lords there were far more stubborn. His father was lucky to have any time to pay attention to his family.

Granted, it was nice to know his father cared about him. Indeed, he spent two whole pages assuring him that he would always be his son, no matter what anyone else said. Certain things were clearly left out of the letter for safety, but Jon had learned to read between the lines. As far as Lord Stark was concerned, Jon became his son the moment Lyanna placed him in his arms. It warmed his heart to have that confirmation, though deep-down part of him still wondered what would happen when they came face to face.

If the tides and gods were with them, he’d find out soon.

This also meant he needed to suck it up and read the remaining letters. For one, Sansa was with them, and he knew she would want him to read her letter. He also wanted to rip the bandage off, as it were, for the other two. Better to get his reactions to them out before he met with his family again.

So, during one of the few times he had to himself he pulled out Sansa’s letter. Her calligraphy had vastly improved since he last saw his little Lady. It made sense, as she excelled at all the feminine arts. He wondered if father had put her up to this, as she had not been close to him for some time. Taking a deep breath, he pushed himself forward, breaking the seal.

‘Dear Jon,

I am not all too sure what I should say, or if anything I do say will mean much. I supposed first and foremost I must say that I am sorry. I am sorry for how I treated you while you were here. You are my brother, my blood and I treated you less than a peasant. I have come to realize that this was not only cruel but foolish on my part. I was blinded by the false tales of nobility and in doing such I lost a brother anyone would be proud to claim.

In looking back, I realized how much you looked out for all of us, cared for us, even when we denied you your rightful due as our family. The story you created for me and your letters have given me much to think about and learn from. I would like to think that I have grown and learned well from the lessons you have sent.

I admit it took time to see my faults and to open my eyes to the reality of the world. It was hard and very unpleasant however, I thank you for forcing this to occur. I shudder to think how foolish I would be now if I continued to think of life as a story, or to try and be something I am not. You were right. I tried so hard to be something I was not, that I was losing my family and the trust of our
people. While it was not easy, I have managed to strengthen those relationships. So, again thank you.

I truly hope I will be able to tell you all of this in person. Though I fear your penchant for finding troublesome adventures may make this harder. But you have the Stark blood in you and we are hard to kill. So, you had better come back to us Jon! Consider it an order from Princess Sansa to her Ser Jon-Jon. (Yes, I remember how you would play knights and maids with me, even when I am sure you had better things to do.)

In all seriousness, please come home. I am sure you doubt my words, but you are missed by ALL of your family. I want you to be safe and come home to us. You are pack and will always be welcome.

I hope you will forgive me in time. I know I need to make it up to you, not just in words, but in action. But please know that I do love you and hope to see you again soon.

Love your sister,

Sansa’

Jon sat back on his cot, Ghost draped over his lap, in an attempt to dislodge him from the bed no doubt. He felt… touched that Sansa wrote such a letter. He hoped it was true. Oberyn and his daughters had said she seemed to be far more realistic and mature than he remembered. She was kind to everyone, even those of lower status and took the time to learn about people to judge them on their own merits, instead of by what others said.

He had worried the most about Sansa, as she was the eldest daughter and the most eligible for marriage. Her head was often stuck in the clouds or some story. He knew she had no idea what men were truly like, not with a father as honorable as theirs and how sheltered her parents kept her. She had needed to know that men of high standing could be just as base as those without titles. That they too could hurt her. He wanted her to find happiness, he truly did. He just wanted her to find it with open eyes and educated heart.

He snorted a bit as he re-read the part about Ser Jon-Jon. Before she knew what bastard meant Sansa had dragged him and Robb into her games constantly, begging them to play knights and maidens. Robb had disliked it, preferring to play more robust games, but Jon had always indulged his sister. He was pretty sure his inability to tell children no started with her large blue eyes begging him to play, trusting that he would make her happy. It had hurt him greatly the first time she refused his presence because of his status.

He had understood she only wanted to please her mother. Didn’t make the pain any less obvious.

Putting her letter to the side he tackled the next one. While torn on which one to choose, he knew of the two writers, only one had hurt him more severely. As such, he chose to read Lady Stark’s letter first. She’d always shown contempt for him, so he was somewhat desensitized to the woman’s words at this point. Running one hand through Ghost’s fur he read on.

‘Jon,

I am sure you are wondering why I am writing to you. Of all your family members I am the least likely to communicate with you. That was very much true in the past, when I was still blinded by my prejudices and hurt that your father broke his vows to me by laying with another woman.

Even worse, he brought you to live in our home. To a woman raised in the south and under the teaching of the Seven this was not done. While it is accepted for men to go out and dally with other women, any children sired during such is not to been spoken of or seen, unless an heir is needed.
I had always pitied such children as a child myself. I had even thought some women cruel for keeping them from their families. For a child cannot chose their parents or the circumstances of their birth. Until I faced that reality and my pride was hurt.

This is truly what it came down to. My pride.

I knew you were not here by choice, I knew you were not at fault, however I could not help but lash out at you. I had promised myself to make my marriage work with your father, so I turned my anger on you.

I rationalized it as protecting my children’s future. You looked so much like Stark, while my children take strongly after the Tullys. I was afraid the northern lords would choose you over Robb. After all, you are so very northern compared to my children. So, I took out my fear and frustration on you.

For that, I am sorry.’

Jon blinked and read the words again. Nope, still the same. He turned to Ghost who barely opened an eye at his master. “I think I might be going insane. Lady Stark actually apologized to me.”

Receiving a blank look from the wolf, he turned back to the letter.

‘I allowed you to be punished for many things I knew you would never do. I let my petty anger turn me from finding the truth properly. Instead, I constantly hurt the brother of my children to assuage my feelings. It was wrong of me and I have started to see the harm I caused not only you, but our family as a whole.

I know my words will mean little in the face of the pain you suffered for years by my actions or inaction. I do hope I will one day be able to show you how sorry I am in person. I will understand, however, if you chose not to ever interact with me again.

However, please do not let my presence keep you from Winterfell. It is your home. You ARE a member of the Stark family and will always be welcome in these halls.

Sincerely,

Lady Catelyn Stark’

Jon wasn’t too sure what to think of the letter. In a way he appreciated her sending it, though he would still be cautious with her should they ever meet. While he might understand her reasoning as a budding adult, the lonely child in him looking for a mother was still hurt and not willing to trust.

In the end, he decided he would simply treat her with polite distance, as he would any noble he did not know. She was right that words were wind and actions spoke louder. So, he would see if she had indeed changed by what actions he observed. With a firm nod to himself, he placed the letter to the side with Sansa’s.

The only letter left was his. Should he read it? Should he burn it like Aegon suggested?

Robb had been his brother, his other half for nearly five years. His breaking away was more gradual yet hurt far worse than anything he had faced in Winterfell. His betrayal went far deeper because Jon had trusted him completely and Robb had destroyed that trust thoroughly. At one time, had his brother apologized and gone back to being himself, he could have forgiven and forgotten. After years of such harsh treatment and words, well, Jon doubted he would ever be able to consider Robb as more than merely a relation by blood. He cared because he was kin, but he would never allow the other boy to hold that much of his heart again.
Prince Oberyn and his daughters had said he changed from what they had heard. He’d been respectful and showed remorse for his actions. He had even cared for Ghost when he was first found. He must have been on good behavior because if he’d treated Obara or any of her sisters the way he had treated bastards before he’d likely be missing a limb, or several.

A whine caught his attention. Ghost was looking at him sensing his indecision.

“Should I read it,” he asked quietly. “And if I do should I even believe the words?”

Ghost turned enough so that his nose could rub against Jon’s hand trying to offer him comfort through their bond. “I guess I’ll read it,” he muttered, rubbing behind his wolf’s ear.

“But like with Lady Stark I’m not going to just forget years of pain…”

With trembling hands, he opened the seal. And blinked at the utter mess of the letter. Never had he seen Robb not re-write his work…

‘Dear Jon, Brother, Jon,

I want to apologize

How are you?

I AM SORRY!!! I am so terribly sorry for all I have done to you! I have tried writing this letter a hundred times and still I cannot think of what to say or how I should write this except that I am sorry. I was a fool. Like Sansa, I believed the stories southerners tell and I was infatuated with the boy I thought Greyjoy was. I didn’t realize how he was changing me.

I didn’t realize how much I ignored the teachings of our father and became some ignorant, bigoted, spoiled brat.

We used to laugh about people like that, saying how they would never have our respect. After having my head pulled from my arse, I especially see why I didn’t deserve respect from anyone during that time in my life. I became a horrible monster to our people, our family, but most especially you.

I know that asking for forgiveness would be selfish and idiotic. I have to earn it.

I also know that even if I do, you will never consider me the brother I once was before my descent into insolence.

So, I won’t ask you to. Instead I am trying to earn it by being the heir to the north I should have been and the brother to our siblings that you were for far longer than I. I know I still have a way to go, and we may never see each other again. However, I had to tell you how very sorry I am for everything and I hope one day I can prove it to you.

Your stupid brother, (who hopes you still consider him such)

Robb’

Jon just sat there staring at the letter, his emotions all over the place. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to laugh, cry or rage, perhaps even all of them at once. So, lost in his turmoil he didn’t notice Tyene until she pulled him close, laying his head on her chest.
“Let it out Jon,” she whispered gently, running her fingers through his hair. The action was so maternal that Jon just crumbled, allowing the sobs to finally come after years of holding them in.
chapter 59 Baelish

(Timeline: about 1 wk after Oberyn and Whitestark surprise Ned in King’s Landing)

Baelish knew something was going on with Stark. He had been holed up in the Hand’s tower more often than not. Of course, he knew about the issue with the Mountain suddenly running amok in the Riverlands. The continued fiscal decline of the kingdom also had the Hand pouring over the books, or the ones carefully doctored by himself. No need for old Ned to find out where some of the gold had been going. Not that the paltry amount he claimed for his services would do much against the debt Robert had created with his excessive appetites. Well, Robert AND Cersei. Neither monarch understood the concept of moderation. Plus the man was busy trying to discover just what secret Arryn was working out. A secret that anyone with half a brain could tell immediately. So of course he had no hope that Stark would figure it out.

Such a pity the northerner was only digging his grave that much faster by rousing the suspicions of the queen.

When he had first heard Robert was planning to go North to get his loyal dog Peter nearly danced with glee. Either Stark would refuse the man, which would cause an even bigger rift between the two than what existed, or he would do his duty and take the position, which would lead him right into the snake pit. Either option worked perfectly into Baelish’s plans.

It had taken years and years to figure out how to destabilize the realm enough to open the throne for him to take. It would take some years more to get rid of those who could prove problematic to his claim. However, Peter was a patient man, he knew very well how to play the long game.

It had started out as simply revenge against those damned wolves who dared to come and take his sweet Catelyn from him. That brut Brandon Stark was nowhere near good enough for his darling Cat. Holster Tully thought differently, the conniving old coot. He dared to think Baelish wasn’t worth his daughter’s hand, even though his own family had been raised from nothing by rulers of the past. The man clearly forgot that even peasants could rise up to greatness if they had the right qualities; qualities Baelish had in spades.

The old fool had refused him Cat’s hand, and after that disastrous duel, where the wolf mutt clearly cheated, he dared to send Baelish away. Well, he had gotten the last laugh hadn’t he? He had taken dear Lysa’s maidenhead and earned her undying loyalty. Such a sweet girl, so easily duped. As if he could possibly love a woman who had no hope of measuring up to his perfect Cat. Still, she proved useful. If not for her telling him of the letter from Lyanna to her brother, he might not have been able to trick that odious swine to his very deserving death via the Mad King’s hand.

It was the first time he realized the true power he held. No, he was not a great fighter, but he was a clever man. Clever men directed the chess board, they were not a part of it. He knew that the moment Aeyrs killed both the Lord Paramount and the Heir of the North. He had set that into motion and caused the destabilization of the kingdoms. The war had shown him how to manipulate the situation to rid the playing field of those who stood in his way; to remake the board in his image.

It was a heady feeling.

So he continued to work hard, building his manipulations slowly. He knew he could not show his hand too swiftly, lest others learn of his plots. One needed a strong base if they wished to weather the storm. So he built his empire, capitalizing on the one thing all men, good and bad, thrived on. Sex.
Lords and knights loved to spout about their honor and vows, but few very truly held to them. The number of whores and bastards in the kingdom spoke to that. Turning such into a lucrative business was simple, building the information ring necessary to aid his plans within that same business was child’s play. People had very loose lips when they were happy or in the throes of pleasure.

Learning to use the information took time and some practice, but for one such as him it did not take long.

Becoming Master of Coin had been a stroke of genius. Not only did his business fill his coffers, but now the kingdom did as well. Especially considering how Robert absolutely abhorred the pinching coppers. Had anyone else been the ruler he likely couldn’t have gotten away with his creative book keeping.

Even better his dear, sweet, gullible Lysa was here in King’s Landing, along with her influential husband Lord Arryn. Gaining his trust had not been difficult, as the man had more on his mind than to look at the childhood friend of his rather difficult wife. Likely he was pleased Lysa was more agreeable to be around when Baelish visited. The honorable fool had no idea just what he was inviting into his house.

As Lord of the Fingers he knew Lord Arryn’s influence very well. The Lord of the Vale had a lot of power. He also had no sons, except for sickly little Robert. If the boy even was his son, he and Lysa had lain together since reuniting in the capitol. One must have contingencies after all. In any case, the man was old and suddenly looking into things he should not. This set up the perfect opportunity.

When Brandon Stark had been killed he had hoped he could sweep in and ‘save’ Cat from her troubles. Only Eddard Stark had stepped in for his brother to honor the betrothal contract, being oh so dutiful. How he longed to pay the damned wolf back for stealing his lady. For a time he thought he might have a chance as the man actually brought home a bastard from the war, proving he was just as flawed as his elder brother. Sadly, while Cat had indeed held this insult against the child, she had learned to love her husband and provided him with five trueborn children. How she could stand to be with that barbarian was beyond him. He would make that uncouth northerner pay for laying his hands on Cat.

It was no secret Stark disliked the Lannisters, and the feeling was returned. While neither family would dare move against Robert, what if they moved against each other? Now, while it would not be hard to imagine the Lannisters making a move, it needed to be Stark to cause the Lannisters to strike back. That would never happen, unless someone close to him died of seemingly natural causes. Given that Arryn was FINALLY investigating the royal children’s parentage, after years of carefully mentioned hints, Baelish could make his move. One dead Hand, a fearful letter crafted by his dear Lysa to her elder sister, and bam, Stark was in the south investigating the same hornets’ nest as Arryn and stirring up even more.

Honestly he had hoped that whole fiasco with Stark’s bastard leaving and Stark daring to strip his heir of the Stark name would have played in his favor years earlier. Sadly, most of the lords had agreed Stark was within his rights, not to mention the blasted Targaryens had given the Warden of the North more power than the other Lord Paramounts. Some drivel about the conqueror respecting the fact the last wolf king would bend the knee rather than risk the lives of his people. Rewarding cowardice is what it was. If Brandon was alive he would have loved to rub it in his face. Then again, he preferred the man dead.

So Baelish had to work with what he was given.

Not that it was hard. It was clear Cersei and her people didn’t trust Stark. Stark was completely blindsided by how poorly Robert had run the kingdom, if one can call it running, and both fell easily
for his whispered words and rumors about the other. Suspicion was high on both sides, with Robert blindly in the middle. The perfect recipe for war.

Granted, he did have to amend his plans a bit. He had not expected Lady Sansa to be so lovely. A near copy of her mother when she was that age, though Sansa would likely grow even more beautiful. She would make the perfect wife for him when the time came.

She was the quintessential southern lady. A miracle given she grew up in that barbaric wasteland. Poised, polite, and well-spoke, she showcased what a lady should be. She even went about completing charity work, bringing the love of the people to her, as a lady should. Of course, he would have to get rid of her pet wolf and teach her to not trust her family, especially that urchin girl she claimed as a sister. However, that would not be too hard. He had turned Lysa against Cat easily enough, and the girl was young and malleable. She would need to be taught more about the game before he could use her as a true piece on the board.

First though, he needed to take care of her father. The fool had been following in Arryn’s footsteps for months and still hadn’t put together the truth of Cersei’s get. He and his men had not been discrete about it either, which had Cersei on high alert. Robert was oblivious as usual.

Then his rival had to get involved. Ugh how he loathed Varys. The blasted eunuch should just return to Essos and leave them be. Sadly, his information network surpassed his own, though he would not admit it aloud.

In any case he had also noticed Prince Oberyn’s sudden and surprisingly quiet appearance in King’s Landing. The man absolutely loathed Robert and the Lannisters for the death of his sister and her children, yet here he was speaking to Stark of all people. He had also brought others from a sell sword company. His workers were trying to gather more information, but the men who came with the prince seemed disinclined to visit his establishments, or any whore houses. Unnatural in his opinion.

It did frustrate him that he had yet to uncover what Stark was planning. Not that it stopped him from whispering to the queen and increasing her own paranoia. Things would get interesting soon, he could feel it. As always he would be ever ready to implement his plan.

Loud yelling at the side gate broke him from his thoughts. Suddenly he saw Renly Baratheon barging through screaming for the maester. The guards that had followed the king and his brother on their hunt followed post haste, said king draped on a makeshift liter, his face pale from blood loss.

It seemed the game was just about to take a turn.
Ned sighed sadly as he made his way back to the Hand’s Tower. He had just completed Robert’s will, though he had carefully made sure to switch out Joffrey’s name for rightful heir. His heart hurt for his old friend, but more for the boy he used to be. Robert had changed greatly these past years. The crown had done him no good, and he in turn had not been the king the kingdom had needed after Aerys.

Even had Joffrey been Robert’s Ned would not want the boy as his king. The child had a madness in him that one could see if one looked closely enough. Thank the gods he had refused Sansa’s hand in marriage. That boy was as odious as his mother.

Speaking of, he couldn’t help but think this had been her work. Cersei had been acting rather rash and suspicious. In a way she was correct, Ned was planning something. However, it was not to usurp her son, but to get his people out of the city. When Oberyn and Whitestark had appeared he had not been expecting it. Oberyn meant trouble, plain and simple, just like his brother Brandon had back in the days. Whitestark, a complete surprise if a welcome one, had told him the North needed their Warden back. As much as he would like to out Cersei and her illegitimate children he knew that now was not the time.

He had learned a thing or two from his father these past years, and one of them was honor was not more important than family. If he was going to make any moves against the Lannisters he needed to do so from a position of power where his family was safe. That position was not King’s Landing. So he had discretely had his men start packing the household to prepare to leave, and he had informed his girls they needed to be ready at a moment’s notice. That both seemed relieved of this spoke greatly about their feelings on the capitol.

A surprising addition to their plots was Varys. He had not trusted the eunuch and still had issues with him, but his information was valuable and more importantly accurate. He had informed them of his true allegiance, the people, and he knew Joffrey was not what the kingdom needed. However, neither were any of the Baratheon brothers. While Robert had won the throne, it was the Targaryen blood in his veins that kept it. At one time Stannis might have proven a viable option, however he had been showing alarming actions on Dragonstone. Renly, was barely a man and he most certainly was not one meant to rule. He thought life itself was a game. Already the boy had tried to get Stark to call banners after Robert was injured, before fleeing in the night.

Not that it mattered. Apparently Aegon was already working on retaking Dragonstone and bringing the Crownlands under his rule. Ned hadn’t been thrilled about that, but he had been promised that Aegon was looking to do so with the least amount of bloodshed.

He also wasn’t inclined to warn the Lannisters, especially after learning it was Cersei who set Clegane loose on the Riverlands. She certainly took after her father, sacrificing the innocent to further her nefarious plots. If he had been more inclined to dishonorable acts he would have loved to deck the harpy.

When he reached the tower the first person he came upon was Jory, his Captain of the Guard.

“Start the preparations,” he ordered quietly. “I doubt Robert is long for this world and I want our people far from the capitol before Cersei can pull any more shenanigans.”

Jory nodded and headed off, two other guards following him. All of his household had been warned of this possibility. Poole had been a great help in keeping an eye on the girls and making sure all
things were in order for him. He had even suggested sending the girls home early on a ship to White Harbor, but they couldn’t afford to show their hand too soon. Even leaving after Robert’s death would seem suspicious, however, Ned had not made it a secret that he didn’t trust the Lannisters and his ‘investigation’ into Jon Arryn’s death had helped spread those rumors, according to Varys.

Instead Poole had arranged for one of the Manderly ships to be in port just in case. They switched out every three weeks or so to not cause any questions, but they had an escape just in case. Ned was glad for his thinking on this, as it would have proven useful if Oberyn and Whitestark had not shown up.

Speaking of which they were waiting for him in his solar.

“So is the Usurper dead yet?”

Leave it to Oberyn to jump right to the point. While he had grown to appreciate the man, he sometimes wanted to throttle him.

Ned sighed but answered all the same. “Not yet, though I doubt he will last the week. The injury is severe, though a man could recover from it. Sadly Robert’s physical condition does not afford him such.”

“Should have spent more time in the sparing yards than the brothels,” the Martell prince snarked.

Ned just gave him a blank look before turning to his cousin. “I have already ordered my men to start the preparations for us to leave. I do not trust Cersei to not try something the moment Robert passes. I did manage to change his will to rightful heir instead of Joffrey as we discussed, though I doubt it will do much good.”

“Aye, that Lannister woman would see it burned before she allows any to read it,” the man agreed. “I’ll let my people know too, this way we can be prepared in case we need to make a fast break.”

“I will inform my men, as well as Tyene and Jon,” Oberyn added casually.

“Jon,” Ned hissed, his voice growing quiet. “He’s here? And you didn’t tell me?”

“It was better to keep his presence confidential,” Oberyn informed him blandly. “I didn’t even want him to come here, but he refused to be left behind with his family in possible danger. Tyene has been keeping him company in the less monitored portions of the city. Ghost was forced to stay on the ship, a Direwolf is far too noticeable. Jon though can blend in with the other northerners in the area. Since many of your own men and you yourself have been to many places in the city no one will question him.”

Ned closed his eyes and took a deep breath trying to reign in his temper. While he could understand the man’s reasoning, it didn’t make him any less worried. He had hidden Jon from the capitol for a reason, even as a babe he refused to bring him here. This was the most dangerous place for his adopted son as long as the Baratheons and Lannisters were in power.

“Do not worry, cousin,” Whitestark added calmly. “Ser Oswell is also with them and making sure they stay discrete.”

“I will worry regardless,” Ned informed them tightly. “Especially as Baelish has many… establishments in that area. I do not trust him not to use that against us.”

Oberyn snorted. “Jon is far too much like you and practically runs at the sight of any brothel. The boy has absolutely no sense of the fun he could have, especially with his looks. In any case, even if
Baelish caught word of his presence, he does not know anything but he is your bastard, one who ran away years ago. It is not unknown to us that our presence is observed.” He motioned between himself and Whitestark. “I would even bet it is known I have met the boy before, so bringing him with me to ‘facilitate’ a reunion long in the coming is not too farfetched.”

“Maybe had you told me within the first week of your stay,” Ned pointed out.

“But Jon is so shy you know,” Oberyn countered slyly. “He is building up his courage to face you and his sisters. Especially the little one. I’ve heard she has quite the punch.”

Ned had to concede to that, while Whitestark chuckled heartily. He’d met Arya and had commented that she was all wolf. That she was learning Bravosi water dancing from Syrio Foyl had only confirmed the fact. Still, he would have preferred to have seen his nephew after so many years.

“Regardless, I will make sure all of our men know to be on alert,” Whitestark cut in, trying to keep an argument from breaking. “Best to make sure the girls know as well, especially your eldest. No doubt the queen will try to keep her close.”

“Aye, she’s been working to get her claws into Sansa for months now,” Ned admitted. “Thankfully she has developed a good head and spurs the queen as politely as she can.”

“With luck we will all be out of this retched shithole and headed north within the week,” Oberyn announced cheerfully as he gracefully slid to his feet and made for the door.

Ned decided it was best not to say anything and simply moved to put their plans in motion summoning one of the guards to bring his daughters to him.
Jon wasn’t sure how he felt about King’s Landing. He certainly didn’t care for it, but it also had some of its own highlights. At least once one got past the smell. How his ancestors thought it would be a good idea to not renovate the sewer system given how much the city grew over the decades was beyond him. He knew it was a common concept back when Aegon conquered the kingdoms, after all the north had utilized such systems for hundreds of years before that.

At least the people made the best out of what they had. Flea Bottom wasn’t the best place, but those that lived there tried to make it more habitable. The Lannister guards that patrolled the city didn’t help in the least, finding ways to harass the people. It seemed like the queen had purposefully ordered her men to be antagonistic and push the people into fighting back. It certainly did not help that the upper class made the divide clear, keeping some people out of other parts of the city. The corruption was obvious as well. It made him wonder what would have occurred if his sire had managed to make it to the throne. Perhaps he would have improved the lives of the people some.

Tyene had stayed close to him the whole time as did Oswell, though he wore a hooded cloak to keep people from recognizing him. Apparently his sire, Rhaeger, came out into the city often to play music and gave any earnings to those living in Flea Bottom. The peasants had loved him for his generosity and willingness to speak to them. Something his father, Ned had in common. The Starks had always spoken to their people and made the effort to show the small folk that they were accessible for them if needed. They may have noble names, but their job was to help the people. Even here his father did the same, coming and speaking to the small folk to hear their woes. His northern looks had actually earned him more trust due to his father’s actions than they might have in the past.

It actually proved hard to keep his presence quiet as he tended to help the people too. Many had asked if he was Lord Stark’s son, given the resemblance and his willingness to lend a hand. Jon neither confirmed nor denied their questions, which seemed an answer in itself. Tyene laughed herself silly at how often the elderly women pinched his cheeks or told him they would have married him if they were a bit younger. Oswell also enjoyed those moments, though not so much the ones where some of the men offered to make Jon a proper wife.

They had been in King’s Landing a little over a week. Oberyn and Whitestark had gone to see his father immediately but warned Jon away. Oswell also decided he wanted Jon nowhere close to the Red Keep, unless absolutely necessary. As such it was determined he would keep his presence a secret from Lord Stark for now. It was difficult being so close to his family yet unable to speak to them. Ghost had it even worse. He and the other Direwolves were stuck on the ship in order to keep people from panicking. Having two Direwolves in the city was one thing, especially when they stayed mostly in the Hand’s Keep. Having near twenty would be another issue altogether. Given that the majority were larger than a pony it was ruled they would best stay out of sight.

Not having Ghost with him did make Jon antsy. After the announcement that King Robert had fallen victim to a boar on a hunt the tension in the city seemed to sky rocket. He could tell how little the people actually liked any of the Lannister royals, Robert was the only thing really keeping them at bay. They may not have liked the Baratheon king, but he was preferable to his wife and ‘first born’. Though there were extensive rumors in the city that Joffrey was indeed NOT Robert’s child, and more than a few believed it. Jon knew it was the truth, however hard it might be to prove. That the people already had rumors of it, and more importantly believed said rumors, spoke to the hatred the people held for the queen.

It certainly didn’t help matters that the Gold Cloaks had been ramping up their harassment of the
people. The violence they performed already was abhorrent, now it was as if they were given a free pass. The injustices left Jon so sick at heart, that if Aegon was not making a run for the throne Jon might have just to save the people from these monsters in human form.

The Night King he could sort of understand. He was a being of darkness and hatred. Cersei and her son though? They were simply greedy cruel humans with more arrogance than sense.

Their stupidity certainly showed at the moment.

The chaos around them was not at all how Jon had wanted this to go. The plan had been to slip out to the ships with the Starks and their people and sail away with little fuss while the rest of the city was preparing for Joffrey to take over. His father knew it would be foolish to declare the truth with so many Lannister soldiers around and with the girls in the city. Even if Cersei had tried to keep Sansa close they had contingencies to see her safely on the boat.

However, none of them had expected Cersei and Joffrey to show just how mad they were by sending out the Gold and Red cloaks to round up any and all northerners, even if they were not a part of the Stark Household and to arrest them. It was a foolish plan for several reasons. One, Lord Stark had done nothing to cause such a reaction, his leaving the capitol was within reason as he had stated many times he would only stay so long as Robert was on the throne. Two, the people of the city had grown to love the Starks. Three, the people despised Joffrey and Cersei with a passion Jon had never seen before, so thwarting their attempts to harm any northerners was par on course for the majority of them. And finally, the Lannisters had not considered just how many people were in the Stark Household or how prepared they were to leave. It figured they would think Northerners were not smart enough to plan.

Unfortunately, the sheer number of soldiers sent after them had made traversing the city more difficult and many fights had broken out.

Jon had been staying between the River Row and the Keep for the last few days. Once Baratheon had been injured it seemed prudent to make himself available just in case. He had seen a few members of the Stark Household, though thankfully they remained quiet. Preferring not to alert the Lannister men that another member of the Stark family was out and about. Many still threw him a smile of welcome, and a few certainly gave him a thumbs up when they saw Tyene in his presence. No doubt they got a good laugh when he blushed bright red at their insinuations. Tyene just made it worse by draping herself over him or kissing his cheek slyly.

Aegon and her sisters must have put her up to it since they were not there to antagonize him themselves.

He was broken out of his thoughts to duck another guard swinging at him. Tyene and Oz were handling their own men, knocking them out for the most part. Some were permanently silenced. Normally Jon would have disliked killing in such a situation, after all the guards were only following orders. However, some of them took those orders way too far, so he felt a bit vindicated when making sure those men did not get up again.

Lord Stark having already headed to the River Gate with Sansa, Veyon Poole and his daughter and Septa Mordane. Thankfully Varys had gotten to the main household and had them move faster, though they had already been leaving that morning. Cersei must have thought herself clever for sending the men in the dawn hours, expecting the Northerners to be asleep. Clearly the southerners had no idea how much a northerner appreciated sunlight. They rose with the sun as much as possible. Longer days meant more time to enjoy life.

Unfortunately the Lannister guards had managed to rally and cut half of the Household off. Jon and
his group would have to direct them to the Iron Gate and the shoreline where Whitestark had set up
another ship.

Most of the men with them were soldiers of House Stark, however there were two others they had to
care for as well. Arya had been in a lesson with her dancing instructor and so had not been close by
at the time of the initial attack. She and her teacher, Syrio Forel, had caught up to them quickly in the
Aegon’s Hill and both had been to Flea Bottom enough to help direct the group. Jon had made it
clear to the Stark men that getting Arya out of the city was the priority, so she had been pushed along
with the others to get her to the gate. Syrio was using his skills to assist them, deciding he would
rather come with his favorite student then stay in the Lannister ruled city.

Jory had ordered most of his men to cover those two, but he had hung back with Jon, Tyene and
Oswell. A few other guards joined as well, mostly the older ones who had known Jon as a child. It
was touching they would fight with him.

Between himself, Oswell and Tyene they were able to subdue the majority of their pursuers. The
people of Flea Bottom enjoyed helping as well. Jon silently prayed to the gods that the people would
have the sense to hide for a time once they were gone.

When the Iron Gate was insight Jon felt a small sense of relief, though he didn’t let his guard down.
He had learned all too well that one was not safe until they actually made it to their destination. They
also still had the guards at the gate to go through. Luckily Whitestark and Oberyn had sent word to
their men in the area and the Gate was under their control. Already Arya’s group was being ushered
away, Nymeria happily joining the ten Direwolves keeping the road clear.

Jon’s group was no more than three hundred yards from the gate when screams started coming down
the street. He turned to see a giant man on horseback followed by several others bearing down on
their position. He knew this man by reputation only, but it had to be him. The Mountain who Rides
was well known throughout the kingdoms for his sheer size and his brutality. He was supposed to be
in the Riverlands causing havoc, last he heard. It seemed someone had called their dog back.

They had already lost men making their way here, if they stood to fight this beast and his men they
would lose them all. Yet, if they didn’t stop him hear, he would follow them to the shore line and
more people could die. Jon couldn’t allow that.

He noticed a cart in the side street. Veering off suddenly he spooked the swung up onto the horse
and drove it into the center of the street before cutting the horse from the cart, essentially blocking the
path of their adversaries. He could hear the bellow of rage from the Mountain, who continued to
push his horse onward regardless of the obstacle. Jon knew he couldn’t jump it, the horse and rider
were far too big and heavy to allow such. Would he actually ram it? Would that work?

“Get to the gate,” Jon yelled at his group, at least twenty Stark men stood with Tyene and Oswell.
“GO!!”

Most obeyed him, though a few like Jory stayed back. Tyene went with the others after locking eyes
with Jon, knowing this was not a fight she should be in. They had discussed the possibility before,
and while Tyene was a competent fighter, she was not the level needed to face such men. Oswell just
stepped forward an annoyed look on his face. Clearly he knew Jon well enough to know they would
not be going anywhere until the threat was truly stalled if not stopped.

Gods he hoped he made the right decision.

When he saw the giant barrel into the cart he felt a sense of fear and pride. The monster of a man had
managed to crash into the cart in such a manner that the cart moved a good few feet. However, he
had clearly chosen a good cart, as it simply turned on its side instead of breaking apart, forcing the man to stop and go around. This gave Jon the time to slip out a throwing knife and nail the man’s horse right in the neck. It was a debilitating hit, forcing the mountain to his feet. Still not the greatest odds given just who this man was, but it would be better than having him on horseback.

The giant came forward, great sword looking like a bastard sword in his hands. By the gods this one was huge. Part of Jon felt fury blaze through his veins knowing this man had hurt his step-mother and the child who was used as Aegon’s double. However, he pushed it down. Anger in a fight made one weak not strong. He had to focus, not let his emotions rule him.

Jon was used to fighting men much larger than him, most of Drogo’s Khalasar fit that description. Both Arthur and Oswell had told him about the Mountain. Oberyn had added his two coppers, but he mostly ranted and raved than offered truly good advice. The Mountain relied on his strength and size to intimidate and overwhelm his opponents. He was good at riding, but now he was off his horse. He did not rely on fancy moves or even smart tactics. Jon was faster and smarter. He could use that. He would still have to keep an eye on those with the Mountain. Lannister men did not fight with honor.

Thankfully those men also had to take to their feet, their horses unable to go around the obstacle Jon created and the rioting in the street causing too much chaos to truly control them. Two of the Stark men that had stayed behind had cross bows and better aim then most if Jon remembered right.

“Donavan, Martin,” he called out in his most commanding voice. “Aim for the men behind the Mountain, take out his support!”

He was glad none of them bothered questioning him, they didn’t have time for such. Instead they immediately began doing as told, easily cutting down the Lannister soldiers with sure marks. A few wizened up and tried to return fire, but the northerners had better aim and clearer sights on the enemy. Jon, Oswell and the remaining men helped to keep the way clear, taking out any men that came directly at them from behind or in front of them, though that way had been mostly cleared by the first group. They continued to try and make their way to the Iron Gate, a few archers from the Company aiding them.

Sadly their luck did not hold out.

A battalion of men from the Keep came spilling out of the side road, directly into their path blocking off the Iron Gate. The men holding the gate tried to take as many out as they could, but they lost Donavan and Thomas on the ground, leaving only seven of them.

By this time the Mountain had managed to catch up, forcing Jon to focus on him. Oz tried to help, but he had a group of five coming at him and thus was forced to deal with them first.

Jon easily ducked the first two swings the man made, making sure to stay light on his feet. He kept low as well, knowing it would disorient the man as he was so much taller. When he could get past the other’s defenses he would swipe at his legs and under belly where he could. The man was wearing some armor, protecting most of his vital spots, however Jon started to pick up areas that were not protected and could still cause severe damage.

The man growled loudly swiping with his meaty fist and following it with his sword. Jon rolled to the side, making it to his feet with ease, however he barely missed getting impaled with an arrow, the head grazing his arm, easily slicing through the cloth. His forearms and chest had leather armor, allowing for better movement, but his extremities still had many open areas he had to watch out for.

“This maggots mine,” the Mountain screamed at the other men, clearly disliking having his prey
taken from him. “Handle the others!”

Jon was pleased he was able to focus on his true opponent but did not like that the others had even more men to worry about. Jon needed to end this quickly. The man was tiring he could see that. He’d likely just road into the city, so he’d be fatigued from travel and the fight so far, however adrenaline could keep him going for some time.

When the other swung again, Jon rolled past him, coming up behind his legs and swinging out his own sword to strike at his exposed hamstrings. The loud cry of pain told him he’d made a good strike. However, he had not gotten away from the man fast enough; his hand coming back and striking him in the back of his shoulders, throwing him several feet to land painfully on the ground. The blow dazed him enough that he just barely brought his sword up to stop the other from cutting him in two in his prone form. Now he could see the enraged beady eyes of his foe, a bloodlust shining in them that was very disquieting.

“JON!”

He forced himself not to look towards Jory, knowing any distraction could mean his life. Oswell was likely swearing up a storm at his position, but the knight knew better than to distract Jon during a fight.

Jon’s arms shook with the force the Mountain was pushing against his blade. However, Jon was not above fighting dirty and he learned a lot of tricks with Drogo. Keeping one foot planted, he pulled the other close to his chest before slamming it out right into the giant’s groin area, making sure to angle his boot just right. Pain flashed across the man’s face and he pulled back, clearly not anticipating such a strike. Jon used his blade to throw the other’s off to the side, though not completely disarming it. He pushed up to his feet quickly, making sure to bring the pommel of his sword up fast, smacking it into the Mountains’ chin, forcing his head back. The man stumbled back just slightly, his size giving him some advantage against the hits. But Jon did not wait for his next move. Instead he spun, swinging his sword in an arching motion with one hand, his other grabbing his second knife. Coming around on the turn, his sword swooped up in a beautiful arch, striking right into the man’s unprotected groin, nearly slicing his leg clean off, meanwhile he angled the knife to slice the man’s exposed throat as deeply as possible ignoring the spray of blood as best he could.

The Mountain fell to his knee, the partially severed leg going at a strange angle. Jon decided it was best not to take chances and dropped his knife. Pulling his sword free he gripped it double handed and swung down just as his father had taught him and Robb years ago. The Mountains’ head separated from his body, the monster finally defeated.

Jon didn’t have time to celebrate the victory, his chest heaving from the exertion and the pain from his new wounds. He turned to find the others, noting Oswell was fighting against at least six men, blood pouring from several wounds. Jory, Martin and Davith were the only Stark men still standing, and they all had their own injuries.

Jon moved to help Oz as he was alone and the others were working together. He managed to take two of the men down before Oswell let out a yell, his friend going down hard. Jon tried to reach him but was pushed back by more soldiers. Suddenly people flooded the street confusing the soldiers and joining the fray. Jon was split on his opinion. On one hand it helped keep them alive a bit longer. On the other hand, it made it difficult to find his own people.

It did seem the Lannister men were used to such issues from the populace as they simply started taking anyone in their path down. Jon tried to divert their attention to himself and ordered the people to flee. Sadly it only added to the confusion and he received several hits from the people trying to help. They were not serious yet they were disorienting and left him vulnerable to the enemy. He lost
sight of Oswell and the others, the street so crowded it was becoming hard to even breath. It seemed to go on forever, when it was likely only minutes. Finally the people were pushed back more Lannister guards coming to subdue them. Jon saw Jory and the others were alive if captured, however he could not see Oswell anywhere. He hoped he was safe and not dead.

It wasn’t much longer before Jon was disarmed, too afraid of hurting innocent people to keep swinging his sword. Two guards held him, while another punched him several times in the stomach and at least twice in the face.

“Hold!”

The man stopped at the loud order, turning to see the people scattering as Ser Jamie Lannister led a group of men on horseback down the road. The man looked even more arrogant in person. He had heard much about him from Arthur and Oz, though neither liked to speak of him much. Arthur especially had such hopes for his once student.

The man certainly looked the part of a Kingsguard. His white armor and cape nearly pristine, his features the type women sighed about. He was also clearly fit and strong, unlike some of the guards Jon had fought.

He let his hazel green eyes scan over the crowd in a judging manner, one fine brow raising at the sight of the dead Mountain.

“And which one of these men killed Ser Gregor,” he asked calmly.

“This rat did Ser,” the man who had been disciplining Jon answered. “What do you want us to do with him? It’d be no loss to kill him right here with the others.”

Jamie just looked at the man condescendingly. “King Joffrey ordered the Stark men subdued and brought back to him. We have already lost the majority of them.” His tone clearly indicating the other was a fool. His eyes then took in Jon, no doubt seeing the clear Stark features. “Lucky for you, you managed to catch Lord Stark’s bastard, though why he is even here, is curious. Even more so that a boy could take down the Mountain.” His eyes were assessing and Jon did not like the look of challenge in them. He kept his mount shut, knowing it would do no good to say anything. It was clear the Lannister was looking for him to make a scene. “Humph. Take them to the Black Cells and they had better reach it alive,” Ser Jamie ordered. “The king will wish to speak to them no doubt. The rest of you back to work putting the riots down.”

The man then rode by, using his horse to push any out of his way. The two guards holding him pushed him towards Jory and the others.

At least they were alive.

For now…
Aegon stared at Dragonstone with awe and no small amount of feeling. This was the ancestral seat of the Targaryens, long before they created the Iron Throne. This was the place his ancestors grew and lived for centuries. It was a part of him, his blood his soul, just like Perzys was. He had heard stories but seeing it in person was far more than words could convey. It was as if the whole island was welcoming him home.

Along with that came a sense of warning as well. Something was on the island, something wrong and his home was begging him to fix it, to right the wrong. He couldn’t explain it to the others, none of them truly believed in the gods like he did, like Jon did. His brother would have understood, hells he would have likely felt it as well. But Jae had chosen to go to King’s Landing.

Aegon understood and part of him couldn’t blame his brother. He cared for his mother’s family, it was all he had known for years. Yet, Aegon jealously wanted Jae to stay by his side, to help him. In a way he was, he had sent Jedar with Aegon to help his older brother. Still it wasn’t the same.

Jon was of the opinion Jae was planning to take the throne and claim it for himself. Of course everyone just scoffed at the man and pushed his opinions to the wayside. Really, his foster father needed to open his eyes, Jae abhorred the idea of the throne, hells he hated being a prince.

Still, he understood once he got a chance to know his own mother’s family. He wondered what it would have been like to grow up in Sunspear of the Water Gardens surrounded by his uncles and cousins. They had only spent a little more than a moon with them and he already felt a fond family love for them. He would do what he could for them should they ever need him.

So for now he would focus on returning Dragonstone to its rightful ruler and strengthen his position to take over the Seven Kingdoms.

This step would be difficult and easy in many ways. Dragonstone was on an island making it easy to siege. However, the castle itself was an impenetrable fortress and getting in would be difficult. Already the Velaryon fleet and other loyalists from the Crownlands had started circling the island before they arrived. It wouldn’t have seemed questionable as Stannis Baratheon was the Master of Ships and technical head of the Royal Fleet. Though in truth most of the sailors and captains ignored him and looked to the Velaryons as they had done for centuries. By the time Aegon’s fleet joined theirs it was too late for Baratheon to send for any help or break the siege.

Aurane had informed him that most of the lords still loyal to the Targaryens only followed Baratheon because he did have Targaryen blood in his veins from his great-grandmother and distant relatives. They knew they would have to wait for the Targaryens to gain a stronger standing, though few had hope for Viserys. The reports about his uncle’s mindset were not encouraging. His aunt Daenerys might be a good ally and worth knowing, but his uncle… Even Jae agreed it might be best to make sure he could not hurt Aegon’s rule. Since their aunt was married to Khal Drogo, a good friend of Jae’s, they knew she would be cared for. In fact Jae had written to them both a few times making sure his friend knew to take good care of his wife. The latest letter he’d received told of how
Daenerys was pregnant and they were already discussing names.

It was good to know their family was growing and hopeful their future would hold more children.

“My brother reports that the small folk are working to help us gain access to the island,” Aurane reported as he moved up next to him. Arthur and Jon were on his other side all looking at their target. “Apparently, Stannis had moved from burning true criminals to others with even the smallest infraction, such as petty theft. The people are afraid of him and his Red Priestess.”

Rightfully so. Aegon had run-ins in the past with the priest and priestesses of R’hllor, some he was lucky to get away from. All of them had a crazed look in their eyes and never felt right to him. As a young boy he had truly questioned the existence of the gods, now he knew better especially after meeting Jae. However, he could never follow a god that believed burning people alive, even innocent children, was a proper sacrifice. He would not allow such things in his kingdom. He would start here in purging this faith from his lands.

“How many are under the Red Witches’ thrall,” Aegon asked.

“Unknown,” Aurane admitted. “Some likely are truly devote, but others may be pretending to protect themselves and their families.”

“If they raise their swords against us then they are the enemy,” Jon stated evenly. “Regardless we will have to be extra careful of the witch, she will have magic on her side.”

“True, but the more innocents we can evacuate the less collateral damage we will have and the less opposition,” Arthur advised.

“Indeed,” Aegon murmured. “I want to do this with as little bloodshed as possible. Do we have anyone who knows the castle as it currently is? Or any passages? Arthur, you have been here before…”

“Aye, however most passages are to the catacombs under the Keep. There was only one that could have been used as an escape route, but it is known and guarded…”

“Sounds like you need a smuggler.” The new voice caught their attention causing all four men to turn. They found an older male, clearly a sailor, standing before them calm as can be. He wore worn but cared-for clothing. He had salt-n-pepper hair with a trim beard and a friendly weatherworn face.

“Indeed, master…” Aegon let himself trail off, taking note of the two guards appearing next to the man looking a bit startled.

“Ser Davos, the Onion knight,” he introduced somewhat jovially, as if the title were an old joke.

“I apologize your grace, we thought he was one of the sailors,” one of the guards informed them sheepishly. “He seems to have snuck aboard…”

“Truly? I was unaware knights had such abilities,” Aegon remarked, wary yet somewhat intrigued by this man.

“Well, I’m not that type of knight yer grace,” he explained, eyes sharp and intelligent for all he was clearly a low born man. “I was raised to the position by Lord Stannis Baratheon after keeping him and his supplied with food during the rebellion. I’m a sailor at heart but a smuggler by trade.”

“An enemy…” Jon started but Aegon cut him off with a raise of his hand.
“If Lord Baratheon raised your status then surely you are beholden to him,” Aegon stated calmly. “So why would you offer his enemy help?”

“Aye, it’s true I pledged my loyalties to Stannis Baratheon,” the man admitted sadly. “But I can also say that man in there… he is NOT Stannis Baratheon, not anymore. That Red she-devil has him so twisted up that the righteous man that once existed is all but gone. That is not to say I am not loyal to the Baratheon family.”

“How dare you…” Again Aegon cut Jon off. To think he used to chastise Aegon for jumping to conclusions.

Aegon studied the man before him and realized just why he was here. “Lady Shireen.”

“Aye, Lady Shireen,” the man acknowledged. “She’s a good girl, hasn’t had the easiest life, but she is kind and gentle and if I don’t help you she will be dead. The Red witch is speaking of burning her to insure Lord Baratheon’s victory against this force, and damned if he isn’t caving by the minute. I can’t let that happen. Now I don’t know much about you or yours, but I do know the only child killers in Westeros came from the Westerlands. While you might have issues with the current king and his ilk, and even with Stannis, I’d like to think you’d not punish an innocent girl for things she has no control of.”

“And you would be right,” Aegon told him firmly. “It was never my intention to harm Lady Shireen or any women or children if possible. I am also very aware of how… fanatical the red priestesses can be. While my grandfather was not a good man, I am not one to burn innocents.”

“Your grace we cannot trust this man,” Jon urged, nearly chomping at the bits.

“And yet he seems the best way to get in with little fuss and less casualties,” Arthur reminded them all calmly.

“I have heard of you as have many of my men,” Aurane addressed Davos. “It’s well known you are a man of your word, and you are one hell of a smuggler, even now. Why did you not get Shireen out before?”

“I tried,” Davos admitted tiredly. “But the woman has her watched too closely. Lady Baratheon hangs on her every word and would kill the girl herself if it appeased the red god. Don’t mistake me, the red woman is powerful. I’ve seen her do things that make my skin crawl and I can’t rightfully explain. Don’t make ‘em right.”

“I want to be able to trust you Davos,” Aegon stated plainly, ignoring the growl from Connington. “However, this opportunity seems too good and I have nothing to insure your word.”

“You have me, yer grace.” Again the men jumped startled to see a young man maybe about six and ten approaching.

“Mathis!”

“No father,” the young man hissed. “I’m not letting you do this alone.”

“I would be insulted by how you two got on my ship.” Aurane stated, his eyes turning to his crew and guards, all of which looked guilty for not realizing they had additions on board. “If not for knowing how good you are at your trade.”

“The red witch is getting worse, she’s calling for Lord Stannis to burn Lady Shireen on the battlements to show his devotion to their red god,” Mathis continued. “You don’t have time to argue
with me or them. If I’m with ‘em they’ll have collateral against you to make sure you don’t trick ‘em. Ye told me yerself, tha’s how sea bargains work. Never trust on word alone. So I’ll stay with Captain Waters and you go help Lady Shireen.”

Davos locked eyes with his son and seemed to have a silent conversation. He sighed heavily before nodding in agreement. “Fine. But don’t be doing nothing that gets yer arse thrown overboard.” The two turned to Aegon. “Do we have a deal yer grace?”

“We do Ser Davos.”

Xxx

It didn’t take long to gather a group of men that could sneak through the tunnels Davos had found. It was an old tunnel, probably thought lost to time. From some of the ruble it was likely an earthquake hid the route until Davos took it on himself to clear the way, just in case it was needed. Aegon could appreciate such thinking.

Aegon had gone with Duck, Arthur and twenty men. Jon stayed with Aurane and the others to help lead the assault on the island, keeping Stanis and his men occupied to allow them time. It seemed a bit dishonest using such tactics, however, if it limited the bloodshed then Aegon would take it.

Davos had informed them how bad things had become on the island. He also told them that the majority of the soldiers had lost faith in their lord but were trapped due to their oaths. Many helped him, including the Maester, in working to keep the people safe. It was one thing to punish a truly heinous criminal with death; it was entirely something else to do the same to minor offenders. Even those that spoke against it found themselves in the stockades.

For being against the Targaryens, Stannis was sure showing rather alarming pyromantic tendencies. The man apparently knew his brother’s children were not actually Baratheons. As such he believed he would be next in line for the throne, which technically could be true. However, allowing this women to whisper such things in his ear and change his moral compass was not the makings of a king. Rather a puppet that deluded itself into thinking it had any control.

The tunnel Davos brought them through led directly into the lower levels of the Keep and the dungeons. In the cells were various people, including the Maester and the original captain of the guards. The latter had spoken out against the punishments early on finding himself stuck here for his trouble. He and the Maester had planned this coup with Davos in hopes of saving the young Baratheon lady and the rest of the people on the island.

This is why Jae always said a leader must treat every member of their household and land respectfully and justly. When you did not, the people would find their strength and take you down. Stannis was about to learn this lesson well.

They released those they could and had Maester Cressen led those who were clearly not fighting ready down the tunnel to the shoreline. Aegon did not want to take any chances with people’s lives. Ser Wesson, the captain of the guard helped lead the group through the dungeons. He also was able to tell them which men they’d be able to get on their side immediately. In fact most of them lowered their weapons the moment they saw Wesson and Davos. Some looked so relieved they had come to deal with Stannis and his witch that Aegon felt sad. Was this how the people of the Keep felt when his grandfather was in control? If so why had his father not acted sooner? Surely he would have had the support.

On the edge of his conscious he could feel Perzys, clearly excited from the whole ordeal. No doubt Jedar was the same, staying closer to his sibling. Both were now near the size of elephants if not a bit
bigger, though not quite ready to ride just yet. Still, he would not have them attack unless necessary. They were still young enough to be vulnerable to attack even if their fire was deadly. However, if he was in danger he knew Perzys would attack regardless and Jedar would follow.

In the upper levels they split into two groups. What servants they came across were easily subdued, more than a few surrendering with no fuss. A few even offered help, as long as Lady Shireen was safe. Aegon was getting curious about his distant cousin, she seemed to be held in high regard by the people. A very good sign in his books.

They finally came to where they could see the battlements. Sure enough a large pyre had been erected, the Red witch directing men to add some more wood. Lady Baratheon stood next to her, like a puppy following its master. The sight was sickening. The guards nearby seemed truly devoted to the task, showing where their loyalties were thrown.

Davos pointed out the other group, moving into position to take down those guards. While Wesson hadn’t wanted to harm his own men, he knew that he could not allow these killings to go on. Aegon felt for the man and the other guards having to fight against their own. No doubt these men had been friends, some even family members. However, the followers of R’hllor were not reasonable and could not be allowed to flourish in Westeros.

Stannis was standing on the battlements looking out on the fleet surrounding his Keep. He was tall and stern looking with a receding hairline and severe features. It was hard to imagine this man and the supposedly boisterous Robert being brothers. Yet they were.

“No! Stop! Please!!”

The cries of a young girl caught his attention. He watched as two men pulled a young girl dressed in clothing only a lady would wear, towards the pyre. She had dark hair like the Baratheons and even from here Aegon could see the scaring on her face. He had heard the rumors about the greyscale infection this girl had suffered as a babe. To survive such spoke of true strength, which many disregarded to instead linger over the scares left behind. Fools in his opinion.

Sadly the girl of probably nine or ten years was no match for the two soldiers dragging her along.

“Mother! Father! Please don’t do this!”

Her begging was for naught as neither parent even seemed to pay any attention to her as the men lashed her to the post in the middle of the pyre before pouring oil all along the base.

Aegon motioned for the men to be ready to move at any moment. He pulled Davos in close to him.

“When we move you do everything you can to get to Shireen. We will handle the others, but you focus on her.”

“Had planned to yer grace.”

Aegon really did like Davos. He bet Jae would like him too. Both appreciated honest straight spoken people.

“R’hllor, we give you this sacrifice as a symbol of our devotion,” the Red Priestess called out in a clear strong voice. She grabbed a lit torch holding it over her head. “May her death bring victory to the true Prince that was Promised against his foes that dare to lay siege to his kingdom!”

Aegon would have snorted if he had time. Instead he would save it for later. Just as the women moved to light the pyre, ignoring the screams and cries of the innocent girl, Aegon gave the order to move in. To his side one of the guards they converted into their service shot an arrow, nailing the
woman’s hand in an impressive show of aim. The torch fell away uselessly to the side.

He might have taken a little moment to enjoy the shocked anger on Stannis’ face before jumping into the fray. Not that he’d ever tell.

The battle happened fast as all fighting does. People hear stories about battles and fights and think they are this great epic dance. In reality most of them were over quickly and filled with nothing but blood and horror. Things the bards often forgot to mention in their ballads.

He could hear Stannis bellowing orders along with the Red Priestess. Lady Baratheon was useless and basically started wailing. Thankfully it did not take long to subdue those truly in thrall to the red woman and Stannis. Davos had kept true to his part and raced to Shireen, pulling her to safety the moment he cut the ropes. The poor girl clung to him like a limpet, refusing to let go of her savior.

When the admittedly short incursion was over Aegon watched as Stannis, his wife and the Red Witch were brought before him.

“How dare you attack Lord Stannis,” the witch hissed angrily, her eerie red eyes flashing. “He is the Prince that was Promised! The one to save us from the Long Night! You should repent and bow to him and the might of the one true god, R’hllo!”

Aegon stared at the woman for a long moment before dismissing her and turning to Stannis. “Lord Stannis, you are under arrest for breaking the laws of the kingdom and burning innocents to death in your madness. The evidence is concrete, as you were caught preparing to burn your own daughter, who all can tell has done nothing to warrant a death sentence. Furthermore, the laws of Westeros have long condemned the killing of any person for the ritual acts of any religions and any who practice such acts with either be banished or killed depending on the severity of their actions. Have you anything to say?”

“Who are you to judge me,” Stannis demanded coldly. “I am the rightful king of Westeros. The heir to my brother’s throne as those he called children are nothing but bastards his treacherous wife passed off as Baratheons. I decide what laws are right in this land!”

“I am Aegon Targaryen, son of Rhaeger Targaryen and Elia Martell. Your brother may have killed my father but he did not kill my grandfather, that was done by a member of the Kingsguard, who broke his oath. As such, I have the right to challenge any for the right to the throne and claim back what is mine. Further, I have just taken Dragonstone back, the rightful seat of the Targaryen family. If I must I shall do as my ancestor did so many years ago and conquer the kingdom again. Regardless, the reign of the Baratheons is over.”

“You are nothing but a fool,” the red witch screeched. “You will fall to the might of R’hllo!”

The woman pushed the guard holding her away and raised one fire lit hand ready to throw the magic she had gathered at Aegon. Before anyone could truly act a loud roar sounded in the air catching them off guard. Aegon didn’t bother to look, knowing it was Perzys and Jedar flying overhead. The witch looked shocked, eyes wide with disbelief. The fire in her hand withered and died out.

“Impossible…”

The ground shook slightly when Perzys landed next to him in the courtyard, Jedar chose a perch on the upper walls, keeping an eye on all the men around them.

“House Targaryen has come again,” Aegon stated proudly well aware of how he looked with the living legend at his back. “With fire and blood.”
Sansa was so relieved when they made it to the ships. Her father had rushed her, Jayne Poole and Septa Mordane out early that morning, forcing them to leave behind some of their things, despite the Septa complaining. The king had died the day before. While it would be unusual for them to be planning to leave instead of stay, it was no secret her father wanted nothing to do with the politics of the kingdom. He’d only come south as a favor to his old friend. Now that Robert was gone, there was no reason for him to stay. In fact, her father had been preparing them to leave for some time, though Septa Mordane was confused by his orders, thinking that it would be best for Sansa to stay and make a match. After all the prince and queen seemed SO interested in her.

It seemed her septa had not known or realized how Sansa herself had changed over the years. More likely she blinded herself to it, still trying to think of Sansa as the pretty southern girl with foolish dreams. She dreads to think of what she would have done had she remained that way. She had seen so many little things about the queen and the prince that showed just how depraved and cruel they could be. True, both wore very good masks, but Sansa had spoken to the people, and even the most loyal of maids had found ways to subtly warn her off.

Lately she had been keeping Lady close, knowing her wolf would protect her no matter what. Even the Hound thought twice before approaching her when Lady was around, though she found she enjoyed his company. At first she had been a bit stand offish because of his burns and his general demeanor. However, more than once on the journey south he had shown he was kind in small ways. She could tell he even approved of her avoiding Joffrey. As the man’s sworn shield, it said a lot that he would try and keep the people the prince was interested in away from him.

It didn’t matter now, they were going away from that place. The run through the city had been scary, yet several of the small folk had assisted them, proving that House Stark had a stronger standing with them then even their own royal family. It was a sad statement about said family.

Still, their current actions against Sansa’s family made it very hard to feel pity for them. Her father had done nothing to warrant the guards coming after them and trying to arrest their entire house. They certainly didn’t warrant the lethal force the guards were using against her family’s men. They hadn’t even tried to get any cooperation first, they simply attacked. Clearly they hoped doing so in the very early hours of the day would have caught them off guard or still abed. Many of them seemed surprised their house was already up and going about their day, as if they would waste good sunlight. And these southerners called the north barbaric.

The flight through the city was the most exciting and frightful experience Sansa had had to date. That Arya was nowhere nearby made it even more so. She couldn’t help but worry for her sister, who was having her morning ‘dance’ lesson when the chaos broke. Hopefully her teacher and the men father sent would keep her safe.

She had noticed several additional men who had northern and foreign features she could not identify. If her father trusted them so would she. These men, and even women, led them to the ships waiting in the Bay. Thankfully they got most of the Household on board and were able to sail away. They lost some of their men, which saddened Sansa greatly. She had known those men all of her life, to have them die was hard.

On board they found her father speaking to a large man that looked so much like her father she would have sworn they were brothers. She even saw a few Martell men she had met when they came north. Her father had told her the prince was in the city, but he had not come to see them. The biggest shock was the Direwolves on board. She had certainly never heard of any outside of the
North, but here they were. The largest came over and sniffed at Lady, who had immediately stood in front of Sansa in a protective manner. The wolf actually looked pleased by her actions and appeared to accept Lady in their ranks. Sansa felt a sense of relief, glad her companion wouldn’t have any issues from these other wolves.

Soon enough their ships were heading to the mouth of the Bay and towards the open sea. A few of the Lannister ships tried to stop them, but the men and women in control of these ships were clearly superior in naval combat. Not that she saw much, Septa Mordane had her down in one of the cabins with Jayne to keep them safe, guards at the door just in case.

“Why is this happening,” Jayne cried, holding one of the pillows close.

“King Robert is dead. Clearly Queen Cersei and Prince Joffrey have something against father,” Sansa muttered. To attack as they did was not only cowardly but unjust.”

“Now, now, we have no way of knowing why they sent those men,” Septa tutted worriedly, her hands shaking just slightly as she worked on her needlework, something Sansa noted she did when stressed. “Clearly there is more going on than we know. And it is not our place to know. However, I worry what this will do for your marriage prospects…”

If Sansa were Arya she would have snorted. Trust the Septa to be worried about something so frivolous when their lives were on the line. Not too much longer Hamish, their guard knocked on the door.

“It’s safe to come out Ladies,” he announced.

“Thank you but we shall be safer in here,” Septa Mordane stated primly. Jeyne agreed, already laying on the bed as if she were ready to pass out. Sansa, however, stood and headed to the door, Lady on her flank. “Lady Sansa I must insist…”

“Septa,” she interrupted sternly. “My family and my people were just put in danger fleeing from a place we should have been safe. My sister was missing during that time. I will go speak to my father to find out if there is any news on those that were not with us.”

The septa looked so startled that Sansa had to bite her cheek not to laugh. Instead she moved out, barely acknowledging the wink form Hamish, telling her he approved of her words. She had found over the past years that the northern people didn’t like the way the Septa tried to control Sansa or Arya, often finding ways to show their approval when their she-wolves bit back. Of course Sansa never showed recognition of this overtly, but she had grown to love the small gestures over time. It felt like she was accepted more by her people, which in turn warmed her heart.

Calmly she made her way to the deck of the ship, nodding to the people she passed even if she did not know them. Those she did, she would stop and check on their wellbeing. These men and women had served her house faithfully and many had been hurt in their escape. It was the least she could do to make sure they were looked after.

She found her father speaking with the man she had noticed before. Both seemed very tense, as did the other people on the ship.

“Father,” she asked quietly, hoping she was not interrupting anything too important. “Any word on Arya?”

“Aye, we just got word she reached the other ships and is with Oberyn and his daughter Tyene.”
“Thank the gods,” she whispered, allowing herself to breathe a sigh of relief. She turned to the man next to her father. “Thank you so much for helping our family and our people, Ser…”


Her eyes widened in surprise. “The same company Brandon Snow formed after leaving Westeros when King Torrhen Stark bent the knee?”

“The one and the same,” he chuckled. “We are returning home to help our kin in the coming war beyond the Wall. We heard there was going to be trouble soon in the capitol and your… brother was worried for you all. He asked us to come get you out.”

“Jon? You know Jon,” she asked excitedly, her eyes darting around the ship. “Is he here? How has he been? Why did he not come see us in the Keep?”

She drifted off when she noted the way her father’s eyes tensed and Whitestark frowned. Something was wrong.

“Aye, he came with us, and we kept him from the Keep because it was too dangerous for him to be there,” the man explained. “We did not want to tip our hand. However, he refused to stay on the ship, he wanted to be in the city in case he was needed. Wanted to make sure he could help you if it came to it.”

“What happened,” she demanded, blue eyes sharpening on them both.

Whitestark chuckled despite the situation. “There’s those wolf fangs…” He sighed heavily. “He and Tyene were helping your sister and the others escape. While doing so the Mountain came upon them. Jon and a few stayed behind to stall the man, afraid he would follow them to the coast and cause more deaths. While we don’t know much of what happened, we do know he was captured.”

Sansa felt the blood drain from her face. Captured? By the Lannisters? Wide blue eyes turned to her father.

“We have to do something,” she whispered desperately. “They will kill Jon.”

“No, right now he is the only collateral they have against our family,” her father informed her tightly, clearly just as unhappy as she is about the situation.

While normally this news might assure some people, Sansa remembered vividly one of Jon’s letters. “You know Jon will never allow that. You remember his letter don’t you?” Her voice started to take on a higher quality in her panic. “He said he would take care of it one way or another! He will never allow the Lannisters that power over us! We have to save him!”

Her father wrapped her in a hug immediately to calm her, though she noted even he was shaking slightly. “Sansa, calm down. There are those who are in the Keep that are on our side. They will make sure Jon does not do anything before we can help him.”

“Right now we have to sail to Dragonstone and meet up with the others and gather forces,” Whitestark stated solemnly. “Though I do not envy the man who has to tell Aegon his brother was taken…”

“Aegon? Brother,” Sansa queried, pulling back from her father to look at them both. “Who else was taken?”
Her father sighed, looking tired and sad. “There is something I have not told you children, something I have kept secret for a very long time to protect Jon. Your mother has only known a few years and a few others have discovered the truth.”

Sansa bit her lip in worry. Whatever this secret was, it was something large. Why would her father need to protect Jon? He is a bastard child, and though he is a member of House Stark, there should not be anyone out to harm him.

“Jon is not my son,” her father began.

What? Not his… But, no Jon was their brother…

“He is the son of my sister Lyanna Stark,” her father continued.

Aunt Lyanna… Didn’t Prince Rhaeger kidnap her… does this mean he was a child of rape…

“She ran away with Prince Rhaeger and became his second wife.”

Sansa felt like the wood beneath her feet was going to disappear.

“Jon is in actuality Prince Jaehaerys Targaryen, brother to Aegon Targaryen, true king of the Seven Kingdoms.”

With that shocking news, combined with the events of the day, Sansa felt her world go dark.
Tywin Lannister watched his daughter and grandson dispassionately. He had only just returned to the city the day before to find the place in chaos. He supposed he should not be surprised given the stupidity the two in front of him displayed constantly, though they each thought themselves so clever.

While he could admit to himself that Cersei had more intelligence than Jamie, she did not have the sense to back up her plots. Most of which were contrived due to her pettiness than any real maneuvers for power. She thought her positions were won on her own merit, when it was Tywin who insured her current status. Now the fool girl was doing all in her power to ruin them, all the while thinking herself a true player of the game.

Why, why did the gods punish him so?

His daughter had the ambition of a man, but not the sense to wield it to any true fruition. His eldest son, while gifted in combat was weak willed and not nearly as bright as his sister. The only true child of his that had any brilliance, both in cunning and in common sense was a cursed dwarf that killed his dearest wife in child birth. He might have been able to forgive the beast for that, if he was truly sure the child was in fact his. Aerys had cruelly taken Joanna one night, not long after dismissing Tywin as his Hand, just one more insult to his old friend. Joanna had of course told him immediately after.

How Tywin wanted to gut the old bastard for daring to touch his wife. However, he stayed his hand to protect her and his kin. Aerys was beyond mad and Tywin knew the man had no qualms about destroying an entire family if necessary, and the power to do so. Tywin himself had no issue with it, and the two had grown up together.

Instead, Tywin had done what he could to comfort his wife and prove he loved her, as much as any man could love a woman. They had lain together a few times before she found out she was pregnant, but the time frame still gave him question. Yet, Joanna was so happy to have another child. She loved the beast that grew inside of her so much, and had she lived she still would have loved him. Such was the folly of women.

His thoughts were drawn back to the present as his grandson bellowed about how he would raze the north to the ground for being traitorous dogs.

There was another disappointment.

While he knew Robert was not the best of men, his progeny should have been worthwhile. The Baratheon line was a good one, his friend Steffon proof of that. Joffrey, however, was a spoiled brat, who like his mother thought himself a paragon of intelligence and power with no true skills to back it up. Cersei was mostly to blame for this, allowing the boy to hide from his wrong doings and not pushing him to train or accept sometimes one had to get hurt to learn. The arrogance of the boy was astounding and truly embarrassing.

Tywin knew he had faults and his arrogance could be seen as one of them. Yet, he had the skill and power to back it up, where Cersei and Joffrey did not have such skill and their power was an illusion they failed to realize.

Yes as Queen Dowager and the new King they did have power, but that power was fickle and easily lost. Neither of them realized how much the people disliked them. Robert may have been a whoring fool with no sense of money, but ultimately the people had liked him. Neither Cersei nor Joffrey
seemed to have the redeeming qualities to transfer that love to the populace. This meant the new reign was precarious at best, especially if the rumors were true.

No, he wouldn’t even humor that thought. His children would never be foolish enough to commit such a sin. Joffrey simply inherited the worst from the Lannister and Baratheon lines. End of story.

The door opened to allow Jamie through, his white cloak and armor covered in dirt and blood, showing the trials and tribulations that had been going on for the past week.

From what he had managed to learn, Robert had died about a week ago, gored by a boar. That his daughter likely had a hand in that was not lost on him. Lord Stark, as the Hand, should have immediately pledged fealty to Joffrey and gotten the realm in order. Instead, the man was working to get his household out of the city. According to that worm Baelish, the man had been meeting with Prince Oberyn and some men, supposedly from the Company of the Rose. He had also been looking into Jon Arryn’s death; a surprise to him as he understood it that the man died of sickness and old age. Something he would need to clarify with his daughter.

His daughter used this opportunity to declare Stark had poisoned the king and tried to capture him and his family to face their crimes. However, according to the rumors traversing the small folk, Stark had uncovered the plot the queen used to kill the king and put her illegitimate son on the throne and bring the rule of the kingdom into Lannister hands. Tywin didn’t believe the latter portion of the rumor, but the former was certainly possible. He also knew the people loved the Starks since they had arrived, as they actually took time to know them and help them where they could. The Starks had always been servants of the people, taking their duties as Lords far more seriously than most. Where Tywin ruled his lands through fear and a firm hand, the Starks had ruled theirs through loyalty and fairness.

Tywin could admit, even if only to himself, this meant the Starks had the stronger standing.

So of course Cersei and Joffrey had to compound the situation and try to forcibly arrest Stark and even kill some of his household. Of course Stark took this as an attack on him and the north and rightfully fled the city with his daughters. Daughters they could have used as leverage against the man had Cersei had enough sense to keep at least one of them close. Granted he had heard Stark refused to betroth his eldest to Joffrey and even the girl seemed disinclined to pursue the prince. That Cersei tried and failed several times to tempt the girl only showed how stubborn the Starks were.

Part of him was offended that they would reject the hand of his grandson, another part thought them foolish for relinquishing such a powerful position, but a small truer part of him applauded Stark for protecting his family from a mad boy. While he hoped he would be able to mold it out of Joffrey, even he could see the similarities the boy shared with Aerys. Tywin did not help Robert win the war to put another mad king on the throne. If necessary they may need to start over with Tommen. He was at least genial enough the people would like him.

Regardless, Joffrey’s temper tantrum had cost the lives of many gold and red cloaks and only a few of the Stark household. The only good news was that they had managed to capture a few of the Stark men and a boy who was supposedly the missing Stark bastard. A bastard that had defeated his greatest tool, another issue he would take Cersei to task for.

He had been coming to the capitol to find out why in the seven hells she had ordered Clegane to run wild in the Riverlands. The Mountain was his to order and use, not hers, and allowing such a rampage would not benefit anyone. The moment he had found out about it he had ordered Clegane to the capitol to await him. He had arrived before Tywin and had joined in the fray, as the giant man could never pass up killing. Somehow this… boy had fought the Westerlands’ greatest weapon in single combat and won.
Yes, Cersei had a lot to answer for.

“We’ve managed to subdue the rioters and get order back in the city,” Jamie reported tiredly. “I have the gold cloaks patrolling around the Keep and the main city areas with the red cloaks taking the rest of the city. The prisoners are in the black cells, except for the bastard, who is being treated by Pycelle.”

“And why is the bastard being treated,” Joffrey screeched petulantly, his face red with rage. “He should be tossed back into the cells to die!”

“Because I ordered him to be treated,” Tywin cut in, voice steady and firm barely above a whisper. It did the job and brought everyone’s attention to him. Besides Joffrey, Cersei and Jamie, Baelish and Varys from the Small Council were present. Stark was obviously not there, Stannis Baratheon had been away from King’s Landing for months after a spat with Robert and Renly Baratheon was also suspiciously absent. “The boy may be a bastard but he is a child Stark has proven to care for, as such he is our only hostage as you have lost the rest.” Here he let his cold gaze rest on Cersei, who flinched just slightly. “If we wish to hold any leverage against the North that boy must live. I have also ordered the rest of the north men to be left alone but kept healthy.”

“Whatever for,” Joffrey scoffed. “They are just peasants. While the bastard might be useful, though it is doubtful, they are worthless. We should execute them to show my power! Right mother?”

Cersei smiled lovingly at her son and was likely going to respond encouragingly, but Tywin stopped her cold.

“Again you miss the obvious,” Tywin informed the child, nearly snorting when he puffed up indignantly. “The Starks care about their people, I am sure that boy also shares these traits. We can use the men to make the boy comply with our demands.”

“But they should die! The bastard has to listen to me because I am KING,” Joffrey screamed. “If he doesn’t I will have him beaten! I want to watch those men have their heads cut off for their traitorous actions!”

“Any man who has to say he is king is not a king,” Tywin informed the boy snidely. “If you want to remain the king you will do as I say.”

“Lord Tywin has a point,” Baelish simpered, weaseling into the conversation. “The Starks are known for caring about the people. However, we should make a statement about Eddard Stark’s treason, perhaps put a price on his head?”

“And ignite the fury of the small folk,” Varys drawled unimpressed. “Not to mention the people of the Riverlands, who were being ravaged by the Mountain, which Lord Stark sent men to deal with, and the Vale who are allies of Stark. Especially when there is no proof Stark even started the rumors or committed any treason? There is also the fact he apparently has become… acquainted with Prince Oberyn Martell.”

That caught Tywin’s attention. “‘Acquainted with’ Prince Oberyn? When did this occur? How long has it been going on?” He knew the prince had been with Stark lately, thanks to Baelish, but he thought it was more an opportunity the prince took, not more.

“My little birds told me the Prince took a trip north many moons ago, I of course notified King Robert, though he dismissed it,” Varys informed them daintily. “I have also heard that Prince Oberyn was among the men that came to meet with Lord Stark near a moon ago and he has frequented the Hand’s tower.”
“The prince met with Stark in the north? Willingly,” Tywin demanded. This was not good. If the North and Dorne allied it would be very difficult for the rest of them.

“Aye, he stayed nearly three moons.”

“He also apparently met Stark’s bastard in Volantis,” Baelish added, flashing a look at Varys, as if to prove he was better. Tywin despised both men, but their game of one-upmanship did prove useful at times. “The bastard clearly made a good impression as he was seen in the city with Oberyn’s own bastard daughter. They seemed… close.”

“So a possible marriage alliance,” Cersei sneered derisively. “They are the only lands in the Kingdom that accept bastards more than they should.”

“Bastards should all be killed at birth,” Joffrey scoffed righteously. “They are nothing but a stain on these lands.”

Cersei looked so proud of her son, but Tywin and the others clearly thought otherwise.

“Blood is blood,” Tywin stated evenly, before changing the subject. Now was not the time to educate the foolish boy. “The important thing is if Dorne and the North ally it will make your rule even harder. Neither has any love for the Lannisters and you share our blood,” he informed Joffrey matter-of-factly. “Had you been betrothed to the Stark girl we might have been able to head it off. The North is one of the largest sections of the kingdom, more so than even the other six combined. Dorne also has a very strong position and can cut off King’s Landing from any supply lines via the sea.”

“The Royal Fleet will stop them,” Joffrey declared naively.

“Yes, a fleet led by Stannis Baratheon,” Tywin drawled. “Who has not been seen in the capitol since the death of Jon Arryn. A man who does his duty, unless he believes the rumors…”

He noted the way Cersei and Jamie both looked uncomfortable. Perhaps the plots to kill Arryn and Robert were not as well covered as the two thought? And maybe the other rumor… No, he wouldn’t think about it.

“Then I will kill anyone who dares speak such rumors,” Joffrey declared.

“So you will kill off the majority of the people in King’s Landing,” a new voice challenged. They turned to find Tyrion waddling in, his squire following dutifully. “Because I can tell you with certainty that the small folk are most assuredly speaking of it.”

“Then they will all die, or I will cut out their tongues!”

“Yes, that is a marvelous idea,” Tyrion stated wryly, moving to fill a glass of wine. “The first will make you a murderer and the second will prove you as mad as Aerys Targaryen. The people always speak rumors nephew, the key is to give them something else to talk about or focus on. After all, a king is meant to rule people, if you kill or maim them, you will have no one to rule.”

Tywin ignored the glares his daughter and grandson sent his youngest and instead turned to him. “And you believe there is a way to end the current rumors and work our advantage?”

Tyrion took a long drag of wine before answering. “That is going to depend on what we manage to come up with. There is little love for Joffrey in the city.”

“How DARE they! I am their KING!”
Both of them ignored the brat.

“We will have to find some way to spin the Starks as the aggressors, but that will be difficult,” Tyrion continued. “They are surprisingly well liked for the little time they have been here. Stark’s daughters especially. Whatever we come up with will need to be very well thought and more importantly believable.”

“Any suggestions.” Tywin nearly ground his teeth, eyes narrowed at his youngest. Gods but the boy purposely irritated him.

“You received my letter telling you of the changes in the North,” the imp asked. At his father’s nod he moved on. “Perhaps we start mentioning that, then add some questions. Why were the Starks improving the North, why were they fortifying Keeps? Were they expecting Robert to die? Were they hoping to secede from the kingdom before this all started? It is no secret Stark was angry with Robert over the deaths of Elia Martell and her children. Now he is friendly with Dorne before meeting with Robert and becoming his Hand? Then Robert dies less than a year after the man comes to the capitol…”

“It could work,” Baelish added, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. It was also no secret the man hated all things Stark. “The right words in the right ears… I am also confident I can win the Vale over. Lysa Arryn was a childhood friend of mine…”

“It might be a tough sell,” Varys warned cutting the other man off. “The north and the Starks in particular are known for their honor. It will need to be done carefully, especially in light of recent events…”

Tywin noticed the way his eyes slid to Cersei and he had to agree. His daughter had caused this to occur with her rash actions.

“Yes recent events,” he murmured letting the words hang in the air. “I believe I need to speak to my children about these events. If you will excuse us?”

The question was clearly an order. Varys and Baelish bowed to them and left no doubt going to work their various networks. Tyrion shoed his squire away with the wave of his hand and Joffrey chose to leave, demanding his ‘dog’ follow him to the training yard where he would no doubt beat on a few squires who wouldn’t dare fight back. He really needed to do something about that boy.

He let the silence linger, eyes on his daughter. Tyrion merely made himself comfortable in his chair, more interested in drinking. Jamie sidled closer to his sister, ever willing to defend her, the fool.

“Please explain to me what made you think it would be a good idea to send Gregor Clegane to the Riverlands and allow him to ‘run free’.”

“The Mountain is not a man to be controlled,” Cersei stated pertly. “Clearly he became unhinged and decided to disregard your orders. The man is more brut than a lord after all.”

Beside him Tyrion snorted and even Tywin barely refrained from doing such. Did the girl really believe she could lie to him?

“While I am sure that will be the story you sell the other lords of the land, you forget to whom you speak girl,” he told her coldly. “I know you specifically ordered him to the Riverlands, so do yourself a favor and speak truly. You’ve made enough of a mess for me to fix as it is.”

Cersei stiffened and he could see the wheels working. No doubt she thought herself justified but he would not accept any lies.
“As Tyrion said,” she spat her brother’s name harshly. “The North has been improving. This means they have money. They have also been fortifying all of their fortresses, including Moat Cailin. I thought this was suspicious,” she admitted. “Then Stark refused to betroth his daughter to Joffrey, as if Joffrey was some peasant! And the girl herself seemed relieved. This obviously meant the Starks were plotting against us.”

“Or it could mean neither found Joffrey worthy of marriage,” Tyrion murmured helpfully.

“How dare you, you foul little…”


Cersei seemed to compose herself and did as he ordered. “While he was here, Stark started tracing the steps of Jon Arryn, looking into his death, which was ridiculous. He was an old man and died of sickness.”

“Did he,” Tywin asked, eyes moving from each child.

“Truly that is all we know of it father,” Jamie answered. “While it was an opportune timing, it was not by any means of ours.”

“Opportune why?” He did not miss the look Cersei shot Jamie basically telling him to shut up.

“He and Stannis had been looking into Robert’s bastards,” she finally admitted grudgingly. Then her eyes shifted slightly, meaning she was about to tell him a half truth. “A few had gone missing recently.”

And as usual she had a hand in their disappearance. Not that he cared, Robert had more bastards than he actually knew and he was not a man to care for his children. Hells he barely paid attention to his trueborn. Still, he knew Arryn did care and managed to find places for the children. He would definitely take exception to the children suddenly missing.

“So Stark suspected foul play and went about following his footsteps,” she continued. “I was afraid he was going to find things he should not so I needed to distract him. What better way than to give him a problem to focus on.”

“By using one of my best warriors,” he reminded her tensely.

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“So Stark suspected foul play and went about following his footsteps,” she continued. “I was afraid he was going to find things he should not so I needed to distract him. What better way than to give him a problem to focus on.”

“By using one of my best warriors,” he reminded her tensely.

“Truly that is all we know of it father,” Jamie answered. “While it was an opportune timing, it was not by any means of ours.”

“Opportune why?” He did not miss the look Cersei shot Jamie basically telling him to shut up.

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Plausible. However, it was undeniably far more convoluted than a northerner, Stark in particular, would care to try. Which meant that thing he was trying so hard to deny was likely true, though he would continue to ignore it for the sake of his House and legacy.

“So after Robert died you decided to attack Stark because he did not come to pledge fealty and you feared he was pushing forward with this… plot?” That she was clearly smug thinking he actually bought her story was not encouraging. Foolish girl, did she not remember whom she learned her plotting from?

“I thought it best to strike first, to show Joffrey’s power.”

“Instead you incited a riot, lost Stark and his daughters, allowed several of our men to be killed and made your son and our family look like incompetent fools as well as lend credence to Stark’s ‘rumor’,” he finished for her, satisfied at the flush of shame that crept over her cheeks.

“It is not her fault father, clearly there is someone helping Stark,” Jamie jumped to her defense.

“Where is Barristan Selmy,” he cut his son off.

“After Robert died and Joff became king he decided to be rid of the old guard and make Jamie Commander of the Kingsguard,” Cersei explained, clearly indicating it was her idea. “We needed a new guard for the new king.”

“So you let go one of the most notable knights in the history of the kingdom,” Tywin summarized. “A knight people still respect and talk about, a knight that would add credence and honor to Joffrey’s rule simply because you thought he was… old?”

Cersei shifted indignantly not liking that he was questioning all of her decisions of late. Well, when one made such idiotic choices they should expect to be judged.

“It was time for a better Kingsguard…”

“It was a stupid idea and you have undercut our authority,” Tywin hissed. “Not to mention that once he is released from the Kingsguard he is released from his vows to the king. He will be able to serve who he wants or tell people what he knows.”

“That could be a problem,” Tyrion ever so helpfully stated.

Tywin sent him a scathing look before turning back to his twins. “Let’s hope there is nothing he knows that will be detrimental to Joffrey’s rule. Though if there is even the possibility I need to be told now.”

None of his children spoke, which did nothing to assuage his anger. He allowed a few tense moments to pass, mentally preparing just what he would say.

Before he could though Maester Pycelle barged into the room.

“I am having a word with my children,” Tywin informed him evenly.

“I beg your pardon milord,” the old man muttered hastily. “However, I felt you needed to know what I have discovered.” When Tywin motioned for him to continue the man did so. “I never thought I would ever come across one. It is remarkable. I’ve heard tales, we all have, but to actually see one…”

“Get on with it,” Tywin bit out, though he too was curious given Pycelle was not usually one to
ramble like this.

“The boy sir, Stark’s supposed bastard, he is a bearer…”

For the first time in a very long time, Tywin’s mind went blank.
chapter 65 Tryion

Tyrion was curious as to why his father was so... out-of-sorts after Pycelle’s announcement. He too knew what a bearer was and how rare they were, yet his father seemed to take it to mean something far more important. Of course the man refused to share his thoughts with any of his children. Instead he tersely informed them that their conversation would be revisited at a later time, especially Cersei’s continued mistakes. Oh how his sister had bristled at those words. He did so enjoy watching her get put back into her place. Really she needed to realize she wasn’t half as clever as she assumed.

Part of him felt bad for the boy. He had done what Tyrion himself wished he had the bravery to do. He had chosen to go out in the world and make a place for himself when others continued to put him down. In Essos it mattered not if one were a bastard, you could make a life for yourself if you proved your merit. It was still difficult, but doable. Even more impressive the boy had killed Gregor Clegane. That feat alone deserved many honors.

Tyrion knew why his father kept that mad beast around, but even he knew one could only control such a being for so long before it had to be put down. He knew for a fact the Mountain had harmed several small folk in and around his own Keep and others in the Westerlands. His father did too, only he looked the other way to keep his monster appeased. Tyrion personally thought his father was only prolonging the inevitable. Every year the beast had been pushing the boundaries of Tywin’s rules, every year he was getting closer to biting the hand that fed him, as it were. His father failed to see that, too sure of his own power and authority.

Tywin had taught his children that power could often be an illusion. Sometimes he thought his father failed to see he too bought into it. His father was a powerful man, with the ability and the constitution to back up any of his threats, as House Reyne proved.

However, even powerful men fall to a well-placed knife.

Now this boy had been captured, helping his family escape after Cersei unleashed her own dogs on the Stark household, which had been monumentally stupid. Normally it would not surprise him Cersei did such, however even his sister knew timing was important. Stark had not played his hand, or really any hand. There was no hint of any true uprising or him speaking about Joffrey’s true parentage. And really how THAT had been a secret for so long surprised him. The boy clearly had no Baratheon in him whatsoever. He could tell his father had worked it out, finally, yet he was also repressing the information with a rather impressive form of denial.

Well, it mattered not. What was done was done. He knew his father would focus on how to fix it, and the boy, Jon Snow if he remembered, would be helpful to a point. The Starks were very loyal to family, even after that hiccup several years ago with the heir. Tyrion had honestly been impressed and rather envious of their relationship when he had visited the North. He had also been surprised that none of them treated him any different, preferring to get to know him before making judgements. According to the middle son, Brandon, Jon had told them to never take anything at face value, for a pretty façade could hide a deadly enemy. That all of the Stark children took this to heart was even more remarkable.

To the Starks, actions were valued over looks and names, a truly refreshing turn of events for Tyrion. He would have liked to stay longer had he been able.

So, when he heard the Starks in the south had escaped Cersei’s plots he had not been heartbroken in the least, and even privately cheered for them. He certainly didn’t believe they had any former plots to secede, regardless of what he told his father. However, he knew it was likely Stark knew the truth
about Joffrey and would have found a way to alert everyone. Sadly Tyrion was a Lannister, much to the lament of his father, as such he had to put his brains to work to protect his family, which included that damnable brat Joffrey.

He understood why his father wanted to keep the Stark bastard alive and somewhat well. Yet, he didn’t know why he was so startled by the fact he was a bearer.

As a scholar Tyrion had read of the phenomenon. It was exceedingly rare, and very few families seemed to have the trait. The Targaryens had been the most prominent, though some with history reaching back to Valyria could be found. This meant the mysterious woman Stark laid with while fighting in the war happened to have some Valyrian blood. While rare in most parts of Westeros it was not unheard of. Still, his father seemed to think there was more to it…

A knock interrupted his thinking, but more importantly his drinking.

“Yes?”

His squire Podrick poked his head in. Sweet boy but very timid. “Your father is calling for your presence in the Small Counsel chambers milord.”

“Well, best not keep him waiting too long,” he muttered, swigging the last bit of wine from his cup. “Be a good lad and make sure a few more bottles are brought up. I have a feeling I will need them after this meeting.” He paused as he went to pass his squire. “Also, let Shae know I’d like an audience.”

The boy blushed a bright red. “Aye, milord.”

Making his way through the Keep he ignored the servants and various nobles that he passed, most trying hard to ignore him as well. Reaching the council doors he passed Ser Meryn Trant, and Ser Boros Blount, two of the more brutish members of the Kingsguard. Not that there were many who weren’t any more. After Robert took the throne that brotherhood had declined, with only Selmy and his brother Jamie actually representing the true values of the Kingsguard, even if people had doubts about his brother.

Inside he found the majority of the council members that had remained in King’s Landing. Varys, Baelish, his sister and Jamie, the new acting Lord Commander of the White Cloaks. Maester Pycelle was also there, the Grand Maester dozing off in one of the chairs. Janos Slynt, the Lord Commander of the city watch was also in attendance for once. The man looked worse for wear, as he should, considering the mess he made of executing Cersei’s commands in handling the populace after the disaster of Stark and his household fleeing. Slynt had never been popular with the people, he was even less so now.

“Why have I been called here,” his dear nephew demanded as he stomped around the room, looking more like a petulant child than the king he should be. His faithful sworn sword Sandor Clegane stood watch against the nearest wall. For someone who lost his brother recently he seemed in a pleasant mood. “I am the one who summons people to the council not the other way around! Who dares to order me, the KING!”

“I do,” Tywin stated blandly as he entered the room, unamused with his grandson’s manners. “You had best make yourself comfortable, your grace.”

Tyrion hid his smile behind his wine cup as his nephew quickly took a seat, knowing better than to talk back to the Lord of the Westerlands. Still, the boy had a gleam in his eyes that told Tyrion it would not be much longer that he continued to listen. His position was clearly going to his head, and
he doubted even Cersei would be able to reel the boy in soon.

His father kept his gaze on Joffrey until he was sure the boy would listen then turned to the rest of them.

“It seems Lord Stark has indeed committed treason,” he started only to be interrupted by Joffrey again.

“We know this,” the boy whined.

“Indeed father, that is why I… Joffrey sent the guard to arrest him and his household,” Cersei added.

“It is not his opinion on Joffrey that I speak of,” Tywin continued coolly. “In fact this treason was directly against Robert Baratheon, first committed near six and ten years ago and continues to this day.”

Tyrion raised a brow in question. Stark? Robert’s loyal dog had committed treason against the man? Impossible. Stark couldn’t lie to save his life… But he might be able to if it meant someone else’s life. Someone he considered family.

“The boy,” he murmured catching his father’s eye.

“The boy,” Tywin agreed, though he seemed pained to do so.

“I don’t understand, what does the bastard have to do with anything,” Baelish questioned. “I would think Stark committing a sin by laying with a woman other than his wife would have garnered approval from the late king.”

“It would have, if Stark had actually done such,” Tywin stated plainly. “The boy known as Jon Snow is not the bastard son of Lord Stark.”

“Then whose son is he,” Cersei queried.

Whose son indeed. From all reports the boy was clearly of Stark blood, however he was also a bearer, which was a trait of those with Valyrian blood. It wouldn’t have been a child of Brandon Stark; the timing would not have worked. However, there was one Stark that had been with a descendant of Valyria for a long period of time. Enough time to beget a child and bare said child, a child Lord Stark brought back from Dorne with the bones of his sister…

“As Maester Pycelle had discovered, the boy is a bearer,” Tywin continued, as if educating them on some history lesson. Considering their audience, perhaps he was.

“A bearer,” Joffrey sneered in disgust. “Not only is he a bastard but an unnatural beast as well.”

“Hold your tongue boy,” Tywin snapped. “Even the Seven consider bearers sacred. However, that is not the important part.” He shifted slightly clearly gathering his thoughts. “What few know is that ALL bearers have blood from the houses of Valyria. What most do not know is this is due to magic performed back when Valyria was strong and just beginning to bring dragons under their power. All who remember when Targaryens were in power, know that they were especially interested in bearers and there was a law that any known bearer was to be brought before the Targaryen family immediately. If a Targaryen child was found to be a bearer, they were immediately wed to the heir of the throne, regardless if that heir was already married or not. There is a reason for this.”

“While I was fostering with Aerys and Steffon, we learned from King Jaehaerys a family secret.” By now all of them were listening raptly. “When Valyria first started to interact with dragons, magic was
used to infuse people with actual dragon blood. This made it easier to bond with the dragons. It also had the side effect of creating bearers, people with both male and female parts, able to carry children. While the Andals and the First Men would have considered this a perversion of nature, the Valyrians took it as a sign from the gods that what they had done was approved. You see, dragons were neither male, nor female. They are both and neither. As such, bearers were considered dragons in human form. When one of these gifted people showed up in the Targaryen blood line they were considered proof that the dragon blood was strong. After the Doom, bearers were rare, but still considered proof of the gods’ approval of their right to rule, as it was proof the dragon blood still ran through their veins. The Targaryens have a law, it is ancient and not widely known. Should a bearer with Targaryen blood come into being, that child has primacy to throne, regardless of order of birth or even legitimacy, for only a true dragon can rule.”

“Which is why the heirs always married them first,” Varys murmured thoughtfully. “To secure their rule but also keep others from knowing they had lost their place in line…”

“What does this even matter,” Joffrey snapped. “The Targaryens are dead or banished…”

“On the contrary nephew,” Tyrion stated in stunned realization. “If that boy is who I think he is, your claim to the throne is in danger.”

“What?” Joffrey screamed jumping up from his chair.

“That’s ridiculous,” Cersei yelled angrily. “Joffrey is Robert’s son, and Robert won the throne through conquest!”

“No, he won it through rebellion,” Tywin reminded her. “There is a difference. The only reason Robert was allowed to take the throne is because the Baratheons have Targaryen blood. Their founder Oerys Baratheon was originally a Targaryen bastard, and Robert’s own great-grandmother was a Targaryen princess. People of the kingdom know this fact, and as such bowed to him taking the throne, as they knew his children would also carry Targaryen blood. As much as people hated and feared Aegs they loved Rhaeger and the rest of the Targaryens. Rhaeger was dead by that point and Viserys was a child, though even he had shown hints of the same madness his father possessed. I made sure Aegon and Rhaenys were taken care of so there would be no dispute. Robert was the eldest living male with Targaryen blood, therefore he had the right to claim the throne.” He let that information sink in. “Joffrey’s blood is already in question, due to the rumors. If they find out the boy is the son of Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark, hidden by his uncle to protect him from Robert, the people will demand the throne go to him.”

“I REFUSE TO GIVE UP MY THRONE TO SOME BASTARD,” Joffrey bellowed much like a toddler refusing to share. “I WILL KILL HIM FIRST! JUST LIKE HIS PATHETIC SIBLINGS!”

“You will do no such thing,” Tywin snarled. “Were you not listening when I said even the Seven consider bearers sacred. If you kill that boy the Faith will revolt as will the people. Nor can you arrange any accidents.” At this he looked directly at Cersei. “That will only prove you cannot protect anyone in your household, which will bring question to your ability to rule.”

“He is the son of Rhaeger and that wolf whore,” Cersei asked, looking more than a bit shocked.

That’s right dear sister, your dear dragon would choose a wolf girl over a lioness. He remembered how she would go one and on about how she would marry Rhaeger and become queen, even after he had married Elia. It was sweet to know Rhaeger had been smart enough to ignore he advances, for even back then Cersei was a manipulative shrew. Even better Cersei was once more second to Lyanna Stark. Not only had Robert preferred the wolf, but her beloved dragon had as well.
“What does it matter,” Slynt spoke up. “We are the only ones who know, as Stark clearly never told anyone. Even if he claims it the truth, who would believe it as the boy looks nothing like a Targaryen and it would be foolish to do so while we have the boy in custody.”

“As it has been pointed out,” Baelish groused, glaring at Varys. “The Starks are considered the most honorable family in Westeros. People would easily believe he would lie to protect his kin, and it is no secret Lady Lyanna was loved in the North. The people will believe as well because they WANT to believe. A child of Rhaegar alive and well? The peasants will flock to that notion and the boy will be safe because to harm him will jeopardize his grace’s rule.”

He turned to his brother, noting the rather tense look on his face. Jamie had served Rhaeger and had certainly preferred him to his father. He no doubt hoped to serve the man when he became king. He could tell he was somewhat conflicted about the son, though he would follow Cersei no matter what.

“It is also my understanding the boy had helped many people in the city during his stay before the Starks made their quick departure,” Varys added. “As such the people already have a good opinion on the boy. It will only increase tensions in the city should he be harmed.”

“The best solution,” his father drawled bringing the conversation back under his rule. “Is to marry the boy to Joffrey. We can verify he is the son of Rhaegar, and by marrying Joffrey to him we will solidify Joffrey’s rule.”

“I’m not going to marry some unnatural bastard,” Joffrey spat petulantly. “I am not a lover of boys like that fop Renly! I am King! I should be married to a trueborn lady!”

“If you want to stay king you will do as I say,” Tywin growled, glaring at Joffrey until the boy sat back in his chair with a pout. “By the laws created by the first ruler of the Seven Kingdoms, Aegon Targaryen the first, that boy’s claim supersedes yours and any other claim that may be on the throne. I care not what your preference is, you need only marry him and beget an heir. Fuck him from behind or put him in a dress for all I care, but you will do your duty if you wish to keep your position!”

“And how do we get the boy to agree,” Pycelle questioned rather foolishly in Tyrion’s opinion. The man had known his father long enough to know Tywin got what he wanted.

“If he doesn’t, the Stark men in our holding cells will pay the price.”
chapter 66 Barristan

Barristan Selmy growled to himself as he stalked down the side streets of King’s Landing towards the docks. He had been ‘released’ from his duty by the new ‘king’. More like the latest cunt to sit that damned chair. He had already seen the boy cut himself numerous times on the thing, much like Aerys and Robert had. There was truth to the old saying, that those who had a right to the throne would never be harmed by it. King Jaehaerys had certainly never been cut by it.

Barristan had done his duty for decades, following one king after another. When his true prince and king had died he had bent the knee, hoping he could at least limit the trouble Baratheon brought to the kingdom. Seeing Joffrey grow up was like watching Aerys come back to life, he dreaded the day the boy took the throne. He was as cruel and depraved as his mother, a more unworthy queen he had never seen.

Gods he wished Rhaegar had not died. Or Elia, or their children or Queen Rhaella. They would certainly had been a much better choice for the people. While Robert had been better than Aerys, he was just as bad for the kingdom, though in other ways. Aerys may have been cruel, but he was smart with the finances. Robert just didn’t care, preferring luxury to sensible living. The kingdom was so far in debt it would be years before the coffers would see any gold.

In truth he was relieved not to be serving the brat or his mother. The atrocities they have already committed and the dishonor they bring to the royal family had been hard to live with. While it was a hard hit to his pride having his title and position stripped from him, he now had more freedom than before.

So he was going to do what he should have done. He will cross the sea and find Rhaella’s children and protect them. He knew where they were from Robert’s obsession with finding and killing them. It would be difficult to traverse the Dothraki Sea, but he could do it.

“Ser knight!”

The sudden childish voice from in front of him forced him to halt. Looking down he found a small child, no older than ten looking at him pleadingly.

“I need your help! Please Ser, my brother is in grave danger,” he cried, eyes wide with despair.

Selmy sighed, trying to push away his anger to focus on the boy. He was a knight, it was his duty to help people in need. Now that he was no longer bound by the oath to the king, he could actually help the people.

“All right child, lead the way,” he acknowledged. “I will help however I can.”

The boy brightened with hope and pulled on Selmy’s arm down one of the side alleys. It took a bit of time and the child turned down various roads in such a manner that Selmy wasn’t sure he would remember how to get back to where he had been. Finally the child came to a small door in one of the back alleys leading the knight inside.

Selmy had started to grow suspicious of the boy’s motive, especially given the area they were in. However, it was not like he couldn’t handle any trouble.

“He’s through here Ser,” the boy pointed to another door within the small home. It was a typical abode for the lower members of King’s Landing. A small and barely functional cooking area, with a table and a few slats in the corner to act as beds later. The side door must lead to the only other
bedroom, which no doubt held most of the family during the night.

Hand on the pommel of his sword he made his way through the door, only to freeze upon seeing the man laid out on the small wooden pallet.

“You going to stand there all day, or get your arse inside old man?”

The voice was raspy, clearly due to the injuries that had been tended some time ago. However, he could never forget the face and sarcastic tone of one Oswell Whent.


“That’s sweet,” Oswell snarked, voice tense with pain. “But my death was greatly exaggerated, as was Art’s. If you come in and sit down I might tell you about it.”

Selmy moved mechanically to the loan chair in the room. He could see a bucket of water and some new and used rags, clearly for wound care. He didn’t pay any attention to the child who closed the door behind him, giving him privacy to speak to his once brother-in-arms. His eyes traced every feature, taking in the changes of his old friend.

“Where in the hells have you been?”

“Why should I tell you? Planning on telling your new king everything?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, the white cloak is gone,” Selmy snapped. “I serve the people now instead of a king.”

“Well in that case… Here and there,” Oswell quipped cheekily, shifting a bit to get comfortable. “Hadn’t exactly planned to come back, but the prince needs looking after and all so…”

“Viserys? Did you go to him and Daenerys?”

“Nope. Viserys is mad as a cat in a bag,” Oswell huffed. “Daenerys is married to a Dothraki Khal, one of the better ones. His name is Drogo, not a bad fighter.”

Selmy sorted. Trust Oswell to focus on one’s fighting ability. “Then what prince are you speaking of?”

“Prince Jaehaerys, son of Rhaegar and Lyanna,” Oswell informed him seriously, as if his words were not turning Barristan’s world on end. “He came here to help his family escape the Lannisters. After that we were going to Dragonstone to join up with Art and Prince Aegon, Rhaeger’s and Elia’s son, who was smuggled out of the Keep as a baby by Ashura…”

It was a good thing he was sitting down or he might have collapsed. “Rhaeger’s son… sons live? He has two sons? And Aegon is truly his son, not some mummer?”

“Nope, Connington and Ashura were raising him in Essos,” Oswell explained. “Of course we didn’t know about that until recently, when Jaehaerys decided to trick us onto Connington’s ship, but it is definitely Aegon.”

“And Jaehaerys… where was he hidden…” He stopped his mind going back over everything he knew. “Stark’s bastard… he wasn’t his, he was Princess Lyanna’s.”

“Now you’re putting it together.”
Oswell then told him how he and Art had made it to Essos and joined a sellsword group to survive. He went on to explain how he ran into Jaehaerys, who went by Jon, in Braavos, and how he looked so much like Rhaeger when his hair was shorn. He told of their traveling with the young prince and telling him of his heritage as well as teaching him what he needed to know. Barristan was not surprised the boy had not wanted to try for the throne, he seemed very Stark in his mannerisms and Starks were not known for wanting power. He had gotten a laugh out of learning just how he had tricked Arthur and Oswell onto Aegon’s ship. However, he agreed Jaehaerys needed to be more cognoscente of his own worth, and not go on his own to Valyria of all places. The meeting with the Company of the Rose was also humorous as well as concerning. They had left the North because of the Targaryens, yet now they were willingly helping them? What would warrant that? Oswell finished up explaining how they had come to King’s Landing to get Stark and his people, while Aegon went to secure Dragonstone with Arthur.

“And you brought him to King’s Landing where the Lannister’s rule,” he hissed angrily.

“You try controlling the brat! He’s got stubbornness from both sides of his family and a self-sacrificing complex bigger than whole bloody North,” Oswell muttered petulantly.

“Wait… he’s the one that killed the Mountain,” Selmy blurted, trying to remember all he had learned these past days as he had been preparing to leave this cursed place.

“Aye, the boys a natural at sword play. You’d love him Sely,” Oswell bragged. “He even gives Art a run for his money! I was worried but the boy managed to take that bastard out with a beautiful hit.”

“And he was captured for it,” Selmy scolded, remembering how much he hated the nicknames Oswell used. “How did they not get you as well, especially in your state?”

“Some of Varys’ little birds managed to get me out of there during the confusion after I went down. I woke up here so I don’t know too much,” he admitted tiredly. “I’m guessing one of his little birds brought you here.”

“Seems like,” he murmured. “We’ll have to find a way to free the prince. Cersei will kill him if she learns the truth and if not her Joffrey definitely will. Tywin might use him for collateral…”

“Tywin has more sinister plans for the prince gentlemen.”

Barristan jumped up, hand on his sword. Varys stepped out from a hidden doorway that swung back into the wall seamlessly.

“Seven hells, don’t do that,” Oswell cursed the man, wincing in pain.

“Apologies,” the eunuch stated calmly. “I would have been here sooner but Tywin called a council. It seems he has learned some pertinent information about the young prince and has set forth rather troubling plans.”

“What information and what plans?”

“That Prince Jaehaerys is a bearer,” Varys informed him pertly. “And he plans to marry him to Joffrey to validate his rule.”
Daenerys smiled brightly as she rubbed her ever-growing stomach. It would not be much longer before her child was born. The way the child kicked she knew he would be strong. Drogo still doubted her assurance the child would be male, but she knew. Life here in Vaes Dothrak was not at all what she assumed it would be. Indeed her whole marriage was not what she thought. It had actually turned out for the better.

She had feared her husband at first, and his people. The Dothraki were known for being brutish and deadly, especially to those not their own. It was rumors they left devastation everywhere they went. However, it was equally true they were some of the best warriors produced in Essos. Her brother certainly thought so, having sold her for an army. Or so he had assumed.

While Drogo’s Khalasar had been full of brutish men and women, they did not needlessly destroy towns of people. True, they took slaves of conquered tribes or cities, however there were rules in place for their treatment. Even better, no child under the age of ten could be a slave. They were instead absorbed into the Khalasar and raised as all the children were. It certainly put many of Daenerys’s fears aside.

As for her husband, he was rather interesting. He was intimidating to be sure. His sheer size and dark features were very frightening, yet there was an intelligent man behind that façade. The better she got to know him, the more she grew to love him. He in turn had clearly started to grow fond of her, their sessions of lying together growing more enjoyable with this affection.

She also had his friend Jon to thank for much of this. She had sadly never met the Westrosi boy who had befriended her husband before their marriage, however she had heard much about him. The children that knew the man adored him, speaking of how he would play or train them no matter what. The girls especially enjoyed regaling her of how he would braid their hair or pretend to rescue them from fearsome monsters. The adults certainly laughed about his inability to tell children no and her husband confided that many had wanted to marry the boy, including some of his blood riders.

For a time she had thought he would be a sweet memory for many in the Khalasar but nothing they would remember in a few months. Until the first letter came. Near the whole camp came to listen to Drogo read the letter, all laughing at the stories held within. Daenerys had not known there was a written language for the Dothraki, but her handmaiden Irri explained Jon had helped Drogo create it by using the Westrosi alphabet to put Dothraki words onto paper. Apparently her husband had liked the idea of writing down what happened in his battles, so others might know his greatness.

This Jon had even included a Westerosi to Dothraki dictionary for her, writing helpful hints on how to say certain things and what some of the people meant when phrases were uttered. It assisted her greatly in becoming closer to her husband’s people. Her brother had scoffed at such a gift, but she treasured it and studied it every night.

She had asked Ser Jorah about the boy, as he too had been from Westeros, but the man had merely grown sad at hearing the name Snow and shook his head. He did tell her it was a surname of bastards in the north, his once home, but he knew nothing about the boy as he had never met. Jon was also a common name in the northern region.

It wasn’t often but Drogo would send his hawk off with a letter and months later a reply would come. Sometimes there were even gifts. Jon was kind enough to ask after her in each letter, and even wrote for Drogo not to read certain parts aloud as they might offend her from his language. Drogo just laughed saying Jon was always shier than a mare before their first heat. He was constantly
teasing the young man in their letters, often earning a vicious retort in return, even though Daenerys could tell it was meant in good fun.

When she found out she was with child she was thrilled, even if her brother had become more unstable by the day. She was starting to grow worried by his actions and words. She was also beginning to see just how much of a coward he truly was and perhaps his belief of being the true king was not warranted.

She had had months of watching Drogo lead his people and even read some of the letters from Jon where he offered advice when her husband needed it. These were men who led by example and action. Drogo never demanded more of his people than he himself would not do. He cared for the children, he sought to teach his people to help themselves, and protected them from danger while providing for their needs. He never demanded things or threw fits like her brother. If he wanted something he either went and got it or found a way to obtain it through his own power. He even asked for counsel when needed and took the opinions of others into consideration, to a point.

Her brother never did that. Viserys believed himself king yet had done nothing to truly earn it. He did not learn about his people or ask for guidance. He simply came up with a plan, which was actually Master Illyros’ and enacted it. Then he whined when it did not go at the pace he wanted. He also continued to try and control Daenerys, however she was no longer his to control. He had said that once she was married she would belong to her husband, as all women did. Still, he tried to command her and even threaten her safety as if she was his wife instead of sister.

It had taken some time but she had finally stood up to him. Gods had that felt good. For so long she had feared her brother and the dragon within. Now though she knew the truth. He was a spoiled child with delusions of grandeur he could never bring to fruition. Well, he would not use her or her unborn child in his mad plots. She had a home now and a family.

As they made their way to the great city of the Dothraki she had found herself growing more confident in her place. She started helping the women with the children, learning more about what she could expect as a mother. Her handmaidens were very helpful and continued to help her integrate with the Khalasar. It was when they finally made it to Vaes Dothrak that things became interesting.

Drogo had received a letter from Jon with a warning. He had told him that he should not trust the maegi, but to use fire. Neither had known for sure what that meant but Drogo did seem to take the warning to heart. Daenerys didn’t understand but would follow her husband in his trust for his friend.

Until the second part nearly had her raging. He had dared to suggest her brother would die soon and that they should burn him with the dragon eggs. How had he even known she had dragon eggs? Was there a spy? Was he working for the Baratheons to harm her family? Further the damned man had even hinted that her brother would try to harm her! She was his blood! True Viserys had been rather physical with some of his past punishments, but he would never truly harm her. They were the last Targaryens! They needed each other!

Drogo hadn’t listened to her arguments, instead he had made sure she always had a guard no matter where she went. Her had also told her that her brother was not allowed alone with her. Though incensed at first, she had come to appreciate this edict as it had curbed some of her brother’s more volatile behavior. For a time at least.

It all came to head one evening when they were enjoying a night of revelry in one of the huts used by Drogo’s people in the city. Daenerys was enjoying the music and gossip with her handmaidens, and Drogo was drinking with his riders. Both were content, sharing looks of joy every now and again. It was the first time Daenerys truly felt at home with the Khalasar.
Then Viserys had to go and ruin it, as he did many things in their life. He had dared to draw a sword in Vaes Dothrak, a huge breach of the law. She had begged Ser Jorah to get the man out of there, but before he even had a chance her brother, her only flesh and blood had threatened her life and that of her unborn child.

For the first time in her life, Daenerys felt her blood boil with a heat that could rival a thousand fires. She suddenly knew what her brother meant by ‘waking the dragon’. A deep rage filled her at the audacity of this puny male thinking he could so callously endanger the life of HER child. She was a dragon. No one harmed what belonged to a dragon, not even another of their kind.

So she had watched dispassionately as her husband doled out the punishment her brother had earned for himself. The crown he so longed for ultimately bringing him to his end.

While normally the Dothraki would have simply dumped his body outside of the city to rot, Drogo had honored her wished to burn his body. He had been her brother, even if he had foolishly acted against her in the end. So, he had ordered his men to build a pyre. It was not until he placed the box of dragon eggs before her that she remembered Jon’s letter. Husband and wife shared a long look. Drogo then nodded decisively at her and she returned the gesture before carefully picking up each egg and placing them around her brother. The moment she picked up the first egg she felt a warmth she had not felt before. The eggs seemed to pulse. Almost absently she cut her fingers on the sharp edges of the eggs, spreading some blood over each shell. She placed one by her brother’s head, another on his abdomen and the last at his feet. She then took the torch from her husband and lit the pyre by each one of the eggs.

Her husband stood with her as she watched the fire grow and grow. A few of their blood riders and Khalasar members stood with them, curious. It was not long before screeches were heard within the flames. Moving as if in a trance Daenerys approached the now roaring inferno. Drogo had not been happy, but after one look had allowed it. She just knew the fire would not harm her. To the surprise of all she walked into the flames only to come back out, with three baby dragons curled around her naked body.

It had certainly been as memorable night and she vowed to thank Jon for his words. Even more so after Drogo had almost lost his life due to a wound. A maegi had offered to use a poultice to clean it, but something about her had felt off. Just as Drogo was going to agree Daenerys remember Jon’s note again. Instead she had Drogon breath fire on the wound, closing it and cleaning it of any infection. Drogo hadn’t been thrilled at the idea, but they had learned the maegi had caused many deaths with her ‘potions’ so ultimately he was glad for the save. He even fed Drogon some of the better pieces of meat that night. The two had come to an agreement early on to keep Daenerys protected, after a very long very intense staring contest. Viseryon and Rhaegal had pouted but they understood Drogon was in charge of the three. Viseryon actually had bonded with their child, or so it seemed. The small golden dragon was often sitting on or near Daenerys’s stomach, sometimes crooning to it. Rhaegal preferred to harass the riders, often being found trying to snatch pieces of meat from them at the fire.

Though sometimes irritated by the baby dragons, the Khalasar took to them well.

Her thoughts were broken when Drogo walked in with a package, Drogon on his shoulder, a position the dragon had started taking often.

“My sun and stars,” she greeted happily in Dothraki.

“My moon,” he returned with a smile and a small kiss as he sat beside her, pulling her into his side. One hand rubbed her extended belly, his eyes glowing with contentment. He chuckled when Viseryon growled at him for displacing the small dragon. “I see you both are well?”
“Indeed,” she commented. “Though your son is clearly ready to be out and riding the way he moves inside me!”

“A true stallion then,” he chuckled, before plopping the small parcel into her hands. “Jon has sent us a gift. He said it was for our child. He has also warned he will be out of reach for some time, as he returns to Westeros. But he promises to visit sometime in the future.”

“Oh? He is well though,” she asked, happy to hear about her husband’s friend. “Did he warn you to take care of me again? I thought his threats were most creative,” she teased, nipping at his cheek. Drogo huffed irritably. “I’d like to see the brat try half those things he claimed he would do! Besides, all I have to do is throw the children at him and he will be mush!”

Daenerys laughed remembering the way the women tittered about Jon’s apparent inability to say no to children. “Just wait until our little one is here and we shall see how well you tell a child no!”

Ignoring her husband’s fake pout she pulled the last of the package open only to gasp in pure joy. Inside were several wooden carved toys. Several horses and even some dragons. They had even been painted in such colors they looked real. There was even a dragon for each of her own.

“Where ever did he find these,” she whispered nin awe. “They are gorgeous!” She handed him the stallion that looked so much like his own, it even had the scarring the horse had earned in battle. “They look just like our horses and dragons!”

“That is because he made them,” Drogo informed her, carefully examining the stallion with a pleased smirk. “Jon was very talented with carving wood. Many of the children have toys he made them. In fact one of the best items he made…” He searched the package again before making a noise of triumph. “Were the teethers for the babies.” Indeed there were two smooth stylized toys used for infants to chew on, safe for their tiny mouths and hands. One was a horse and the other a dragon, both clear of any paint. “These will be well used.”

“We will have to find a way to thank him one day,” she murmured laughing as she watched Rhaegal and Viseryon checking out the sculpted dragons curiously.

“I’d send him a whore but he’d probably blush to death,” Drogo grunted, placing the carved horses away from the dragons to keep them safe for when his child was born. Daenerys huffed in laughter. “I take it he still has his ‘maidenhead’?”

“He needs to hurry up, I have a lot of ale riding on him,” Drogo complained.
“Is this a joke,” Robb demanded as he stared at Maester Luwin. He was in his father’s solar with
Great Jon Umber, Lord Tallhart, Lord Manderly, Mance Rayder, Tormund Giantsbane and
surprisingly Lord Reed, who rarely left the Neck. It was the latest of meetings with some of the lords
and free folk to keep the north running and prepared for the oncoming war with the Walkers.

He had been meeting with various lords at different intervals so as not to take them all away from
their keeps at once. He had taken his grandfather’s advice and written to each of them and asked
them to come discuss some of their proposals to him. This way he could clarify any questions in
person, it also made them feel a part of the process for protecting the north, which made them feel
important. Apparently one had to cater to the egos of their lords to keep them happy. Gods he wished
he was not the heir to the north, these men, and woman (have to remember the Mormonts and
spearwives) could be very trying.

Still this was not the letter he was expecting to receive. Ever.

“What is it milord,” Lord Manderly asked, ever the one to get gossip.

Robb considered not telling them, but he would need their help ultimately.

“It’s a letter from the crown. King Robert is dead and his son, Joffrey has ascended the throne,” he
explained in a barely controlled tone.

“Why do we care about some southern greenboy and a dead kneeler,” Tormund huffed irritably.

“Because, that greenboy is declaring my father a traitor to the crown,” Robb ground out.

“Ned Stark a traitor,” Great Jon barked in laughter. “What crime could he have committed to get that
title? Clearly the little shit is full of it!”

Robb couldn’t help but agree, and nearly every man there clearly thought it was a joke. “Supposedly
my brother, Jon, is not actually my brother but the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and my Aunt Lyanna.
They are claiming father was conspiring to put him on the throne.”

While Manderly and Tallhart joined him in scoffing at the sheer idea of such a plot, he noted the
others were eerily quiet. While he expected such from Rayder and Reed, Great Jon was never quiet,
and he’d come to learn Tormund had an opinion about everything. Robb narrowed his eyes.

“What do you know,” he demanded of Great Jon, knowing he’d get nowhere with anyone else.

“Uh… well…” The big man actually fidgeted.

“Jon is indeed the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark,” Lord Reed interrupted much to
Great Jon’s relief. “I was at the tower of Joy when we found her, dying from complications of
childbirth. She had run off with Rhaeger and married him as his second wife. Before they could tell
anyone, King Aerys had killed your grandfather and uncle and the war was in full swing. To protect
your cousin, your father took him as his own, naming him a bastard child to save him from Robert
Baratheon and the Lannisters, who had murdered his older half-siblings. He was named Jaehaerys
Targaryen, until Ned hid him as Jon Snow. However, never once did Ned consider putting Jon on
the throne, if anything he wanted to protect the boy from it.”

Robb just stared at him in disbelief. He mind whirled with the possibilities. While he wanted to decry
such a story, part of him wondered. His father had never named Jon’s mother, wouldn’t even speak of her. And as honorable as his father was it had been strange he broke his wedding vows so soon after uttering them, even if he had been at war. Yet, for family, his father would do anything, even lie about a child’s parentage…

“Well… I’d like to say I’m shocked,” Lord Tallhart muttered wryly. “But truth be told I always found it odd that Lyanna was ‘kidnapped’. That girl must have bested most of us in the yard at least once, sometimes more. Finding out she ran from a marriage with Baratheon really isn’t that surprising.”

Robb just stared at him in shock. “But… isn’t that why the north went to war?”

“Part of it,” Great Jon informed him. “But really it was because Aerys had killed Rickard and Brandon the way he did. The old king was madder than a badger with day sickness, and that just proved it. Baratheon was the one who pushed the idea she was taken against her will.”

“Why’s it treason to protect a child, especially one of your blood,” Tormund demanded suddenly. “Seems stupid. The child didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Your right.” Great Jon actually looked pained to agree with the man. “But that’s never stopped the stupid southerners from thinking such things. Baratheon’s hated the Targaryens since Rhaeger stole Lyanna away, he’s been trying to kill the last of them off for years.”

“If he stole her, she’s his fair and square,” Tormund argued. “Besides, you can’t steal a northern woman who doesn’t want to be stolen.”

The northern lords actually chuckled at that, clearly agreeing with the sentiment, if not the actual practice.

“So is the new king calling for your father and cousin’s heads,” Mance asked bringing them back on topic.

“My father, yes,” Robb admitted. “Apparently my bro… cou… Jon has been discovered to be a bearer, which is considered sacred by the Seven. As such, to prove his fidelity to the ‘true king’, he is to be married to Joffrey Baratheon, and we are to bend the knee to our new monarchy,” Robb spat out angrily. “If that little cunt thinks I will allow him to marry Jon against his will…”

“Does the new king have Lord Stark in custody or your sisters,” Manderly queried with worry.

“It doesn’t say,” Robb sighed. “So I do not know for sure…”

The door slammed open to let a harried Lady Catelyn into the room.

“Mother… what…”

“We just received word from your father,” she gasped out, holding a note for him to see. “He and the girls have escaped King’s Landing and are heading to Dragonstone. However, Jon has been captured by the Lannisters. Your father and others are working to find a way to free him, but you might need to call banners if the Lannisters try to push you to bend the knee.” She thrust the missive into her son’s hand.

“Well that supports what we have heard,” Mance muttered.

Maester Luwin handed the lady the letter from the crown, her eyes going wide with shock.
“Of course,” she stated morosely. “They need Jon to secure Joffrey’s reign. As a Targaryen bearer it is the best way to do so…”

“Secure his reign,” Tallhart asked bemused. “Technically as Robert’s son he is heir to the throne. The Baratheons do have Targaryen blood as well, which is why of all the lords in the Rebellion he was the one allowed to take the bloody thing… um…milady.”

“Except Joffrey is apparently NOT Robert Baratheon’s son,” Robb stated tiredly. “According to this, father discovered Cersei Lannister was able to cockhold her husband with her own brother, Jamie Lannister and the royal children are the result of their union. None of them are legitimate.”

“So she fucked her brother,” Tormund asked Mance who merely sighed and nodded. Trust the man to never have any sense of tact. “Didn’t the Dragon people do the same?”

“Yes, which resulted in many of them being mad,” Maester Luwin answered the man, his experience with children making him far more patient. “However, the Targaryens also had magic in their blood which often countered the effect of incest, and never did they marry a brother to a sister when they were twins, as the queen and her brother are.”

The loud wildling nodded his head, not really understanding but knowing when magic was involved it was best just to accept it.

“It doesn’t matter whose child Joffrey is,” Mance reminded them gently. “However, Jon is too important to all of our people to leave him there. He is the one who has brought hope to the Free Folk and has helped prepare the north for the true enemy. Many of ours believe he will have a part to play against the Night King.” He stopped the others from speaking. “It doesn’t matter if it is true or not, what matters is people believe. He has brought them HOPE. If Jon dies, then that hope dies with him, and people without hope are the most dangerous there are.”

Robb sat quietly for a moment thinking everything over. He knew Mance was right, and Jon was very important to the north, especially in the upcoming conflict. He wished his brother… cousin…no Brother damnit! He wished he didn’t have to have that pressure, but it was not up to him. Further, if he didn’t do something the south could weaken the north, something they could not afford.

“Call banners,” he stated decisively. “Mance, will the Free Folk assist us in freeing Jon?”

“Aye, we can spare men and women to help get the boy to safety.”

“I’ll go, always wanted to see what the fuss was about in the southern lands,” Tormund offered jovially. “Besides, if I get to kill some kneelers, even better.”

Robb refrained from rolling his eyes, but barely. “We will likely have Dorne on our side, given Prince Oberyn’s apparent fondness of Jon, but we best send a missive to make sure. Can we count on the Vale? Aunt Lysa is now in charge yes?”

“Yes,” Catelyn responded thoughtfully. “I also know Uncle Brynden is there as well. They can help us.”

“The Crownlands will likely be more open to an alliance, they have not been happy since the Targaryens fell, and the chance to put another on the throne would appeal to them,” Manderly mentioned. “If we could get the Reach as well it would lock the Lannisters between enemies on all fronts.”

“The only way you’re getting the Reach is through marriage,” Tallhart reminded them. “And it’s no secret Mace Tyrell has been angling his daughter to be a queen. There is the possibility of marrying a
daughter to their son and heir Willas. I understand since his leg was lamed he has not had many offers despite being the next Lord Paramount of the Reach.”

“There is still the chance Lady Margery could be queen,” Robb muttered, eyes lingering on the rest of his father’s letter.

“You planning on putting Jon on the throne,” Umber jumped in. “Might not be a bad idea. Get rid of the damned lions and get the rest of the kingdom behind us for the real battle.”

“Not a bad idea indeed,” Robb drawled. “But unnecessary. It seems Jon was not the only Targaryen hidden from the crown. Father has indicated he plans to meet up with Aegon Targaryen, the son of Rhaegar and Princess Elia, the true heir to the throne.”

The northern lords and even Mance looked shocked, Tormund didn’t seem to care one way or another, which was no surprise. His mother had obviously read that part as well, her mind clearly worried for the war to come. Regardless a war with the south was not something Robb wanted to deal with, not with winter coming and an even deadlier enemy with it. Sadly it seemed he did not have a choice.

“First and foremost we call banners,” he stated strongly. “We then discuss this with all the bannermen and get more information from father. We also need to see the state of the Riverlands and the Vale and make sure they are indeed on our side. Mance, can you and Tormund find some Free folk who can join a small contingent to go south and see about freeing Jon? I feel a small unit would be better than a larger one. Once we get the army together we can keep the Lannisters focused on us giving them a chance to slip through any defenses.”

“Aye, that would work best. Perhaps even some of Lord Reed’s men can help us through the Neck, where most don’t normally tread. Should help hide our path,” he suggested.

“I can assist with that, and make sure any southern army cannot pass the Neck northward,” the smaller man assured them all.

Robb called the meeting for the time being allowing Luwin to send out the missives and the others to get word out to their own people. It shocked him how much his world view could change with just two missives.

‘Dark wings, dark words,’ he thought as he absorbed the information.

“Hang on Jon…”
Aegon stood before the giant map table commissioned by his ancestor studying Westeros. He knew it would need to be updated, the northern section especially from Jae’s stories. Still, it was almost surreal to be standing in the place his ancestors once stood, planning on conquering the same sections of land. Despite being one technical kingdom, the seven realms were all vastly different and acted like it. Getting them on his side would be very reminiscent of his ancestor’s campaign.

He already had the Crownlands and Dorne on his side. He was quite sure the North would fall in as well. While Eddard Stark had been loyal to Robert Baratheon, he would not hold the same for the mad boy prince that was in actuality a bastard of the queen and her brother. His family may have practiced incest, however there were extenuating circumstances according to his ancestors, mainly the magic in their blood. Regardless, it was not an option he wanted for anyone. While he might have been attracted to Jae at first, he realized it was actually the strong bond of their blood trying to alert him of their relation. He would always protect Jae, and no one was going to dare marry his baby brother without his clear approval, but the thought of laying with him never crossed his mind. He was so glad his father had broken tradition and married fresh blood. Hells, even his ancestors were starting to realize their practices had actually hurt their bloodline.

Regardless, it was clear Joffrey’s parentage had produced an insane monster instead of a true king, or even a plausible one. Well, he would simply have to fix that.

The Stormlanders on the island had been wary at first, however, Stannis’ actions and the Red Priestess had drained their loyalty to the Baratheons, well most of them. Lady Shireen was still considered worthy of their oaths, and Aegon had personally told all of the Baratheon men he would have it no other way. Lady Shireen was actually his distant cousin and he would bring his wrath down on any who harmed her. The fact he refused to keep her locked up had endeared him to the Baratheon servants. Not that he would dare. Jedar had grown to like the girl and often acted like an overgrown cat around her, laying his head in her lap and begging for scratches. Aegon would not have believed it had he not seen it for himself. While it had scared many of the servants, Shireen herself had been overjoyed and loved on the dragon constantly. She didn’t even mind when Perzys would join in, clearly jealous of the attention his nest brother was receiving. More than once he had found her in the gardens reading to the two dozing lizards like they were tiny children. He had even joined a time or two, liking the calm inflection of her voice.

Jon had given him the stink eye at first, but slowly calmed realizing the girl was no real threat. Arthur and Aurane had both rolled their eyes at the man. Aurane’s father Lucerys had joined them as had Lord Sunglass and Lord Stokeworth. The others had sent word they were securing the borders for Aegon. He had word that His uncle and Lord Stark would be with them soon, yet nothing from Jae, which had him worried. He had explicitly told his brother to send him a missive once he was on the boat. Jedar’s recent anxiety had not helped calm Aegon any.

Currently most of his current Bannermen were discussing who he could gain as allies and why. His cousins Obara and Nymeria watched on, clearly thinking most of the men were fools, but thankfully did not voice their opinions. Ser Davos was there at his request as well as Ser Wesson. The latter knew more about the Stormlands and while not happy about it, he also knew Lord Renly would not be the best choice for taking the crown. As a Lord Paramount, he’d be quirky but manageable. As a king, well, he’d probably beat Robert on excessiveness and the kingdom did not need that.

He was broken from his thoughts when Jedar let out a horrific roar. He turned to the large window and watched as the dragon flew high in the air, spewing fire with a rage Aegon had not seen before.
Something was wrong.

“Yer Grace,” Ser Davos asked nervously. “Is that something we should be worried for…”

“Yes,” he replied simply. “But not for anything Jedar would do, but what this means. Something happened to Jae.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Jon scoffed, waving it off as if it were insignificant. “We have more important things to worry about anyway…”

Before anyone could say anything else the guard at the door announced Lord Stark, Prince Oberyn and Whitestark. The three men came into the room followed by two young girls and one Direwolf. Aegon knew instantly who they were, noting Jae’s description of the girls were spot on, even though he remembered them from years ago. The eldest Sansa, if he remembered, was quite the beauty with deep red hair and fine features. The youngest definitely looked more like Jae, with deep brown hair and slate grey eyes and he would bet she had quite a bit of wolf’s blood given the way she was glaring. She shared many traits with her father and Whitestark, who looked more like brothers than distant cousins.

However, the one person he wanted to see was obviously missing.

“Where is Jae,” he demanded, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“I would be insulted by the lack of greeting, but I understand your worry,” his uncle stated tartly. He gave them a quick rundown of the events that occurred upon reaching King’s Landing up to the Lannisters foolishly attacking House Stark. “Jae fell behind with Ser Oswell and several of the Stark men when the Mountain joined in the pursuit. We know he was captured alive but we do not know more than that.”

“Actually we might your grace,” Maester Cressen spoke up as he entered the room. “I received a missive from King’s Landing for Lord Stannis. It appears they do not know you have secured Dragonstone.”

Aegon took the missive and read it quickly then read it again. His eyes narrowed and he started shaking with the power of his rage. Those damned Lions dared to take HIS little brother!

Outside Perzys joined Jedar in showing his anger to the world, as Aegon silently passed the note to Arthur and moved to the window.

Accepting his liege did not want to speak the knight informed the others of the contents.

“Well, the crown is calling for your head Lord Stark, which is not a surprise,” Arthur muttered, growing grimmer the further down he got. “They are not stating that you caused King Robert’s death though. Instead they are stating you hide the by-product of Prince Rhaeger’s affair with your sister, which was a treasonous offence to Robert Baratheon. They are declaring your head be presented and the north bow to them. They have also discovered Prince Jaehaerys is a bearer and as such have decided to marry him to Joffrey to prove his fealty to the crown.”

Silence reigned for all of a minute before Jon started ranting.

“I knew it! I knew we couldn’t trust that bastard boy! He was angling for the crown the whole time,” he bellowed angrily.

“That is a lie and you know it,” Oberyn growled at the other, tired of the way the man constantly put Jaehaerys down. “If he had been, he would have done it long before now!”
“You say that but he was raised by this traitorous dog,” Jon argued back. “He probably wanted to lure Aegon into a sense of security before closing his trap and stealing his birthright! He’s just a scheming mongrel…”

Aegon had been turning to let his anger out on the man when a loud smack echoed through the room silencing him. Aegon had expected to find the younger Stark girl in front of Connington ready to tear his throat out. He had not been expecting Lady Sansa to be standing there, actually baring her teeth like her direwolf companion next to her.

“That mongrel is our brother,” she hissed irately at the shocked man. “He may be our cousin in actuality but he belongs to our pack, and he would NEVER harm anyone he sees as pack. If Prince Aegon is his brother, then Jon would do everything in his power to protect him, even DIE for him. Jon would be the first to place the crown on his brother’s head and take the knee to his rule. Do not dare ever suggest again that Jon would take anyone’s birth right! That you even say such things speaks that you know nothing of Jon or the man he is! And if you continue to disparage his honor you will find out just what HIS pack is willing to do for him!”

As if to back up her words the younger sister moved to her side, also glaring at Connington and Lord Stark stood tall behind his daughters. Even Whitestark had subtly placed himself with them, showing Jon there was indeed a reason the Stark sigil was that of a wolf.

“And it is a large pack indeed,” Aegon added, moving to stand with them. “As you seem to forget, Jaehaerys is NOT just a wolf but a dragon as well. He is a PRINCE of this realm and I will not tolerate any further words against him. Jon would never willingly agree to a marriage, especially not to one with Lannister blood. We have both spoken often of the punishment Tywin and his monsters deserve for what they did to our sister and Mother Elia. This is obviously a ploy by the Lannisters to keep the crown in their hands.”

“Likely Tywin’s idea,” Lucerys informed them, helping to lower some of the tension. “He was fostered with Aerys and Steffon Baratheon when he was a boy. He was taught many things, especially laws of the Targaryens. You may not know this your grace, but bearers were very important to the Targaryen family. So much so, that if one was found they would immediately be married to the heir. It was believed that as they are neither male nor female they are dragons in human form, and the magic in their blood more potent. He would see the boy as a threat to Joffrey’s reign, but he could not harm him as the Seven have also deemed bearers sacred. So the best way to deal with the boy is to marry him to the new king.”

“It is also likely Tywin suspects Joffrey’s true parentage,” Lord Stokeworth added thoughtfully. “He’d never admit it; however he is also aware the only reason Baratheon was allowed the throne was because he had Targaryen blood. Had Lord Stark or Arryn tried to claim it, hells if Tywin himself had tried, they would have been denied. He must fear people will discover Joffrey truly isn’t Baratheon, thus has not right to the throne, but with a marriage to a Targaryen that issue is solved.”

“Is there any way we could send a small force to get him out,” Arthur suggested. “I know some of the old tunnel ways.”

“We do have an ally in the Keep,” Whitestark stated quietly.

“Yes, but the Lannisters will be on their guard and patrols will be increased,” Oberyn reminded them. “A rescue mission now could lose us the upper hand, as they clearly do not know you are alive and beginning you campaign. I do not like it, but it might be best to gather allies and cut off the Lannister support before they realize they have lost true power.”

“How can you say that,” Arya yelled indignantly.
Lord Stark placed a calming hand on her shoulder. “While I do not like it Prince Oberyn is right. However.” He gave his daughters a look to silence them both. “It is very likely the same missive we have received will have reached the North. My people will not let this stand, not after all Jon has done for us. He is also a member of the Stark family, and the north is loyal to us. I have already sent a missive to my son to call banners, and we might be able to distract the Lannisters enough to allow them to slip on their protections of the Keep. We must be patient though and strike when the time is right. While Jon is there captive they cannot harm him. Not only is he a bearer, but he is the son of Rhaegar Targaryen. The small folk of King’s Landing loved the prince dearly, and any harm to his son will not be taken well. The queen and her children are already disliked greatly by them, and Tywin will know this. He will stay Joffrey and Cersei’s hands, if only to protect his legacy. That should buy us some time to find a way to help him.”

“But if Joffrey marries Jaehaerys, won’t that undermined Aegon’s claim,” Aurane queried.

“That would be true,” Lord Stark started. The others started to yell and cause a fuss but Arya slammed a small fist on the table.

“Let my father finish before you go getting stupid,” she growled out, much to Aegon’s amusement. He definitely saw why Jae considered her his favorite.

Lord Stark gave his daughter an exasperated look but continued all the same. “However, there are two laws about bearers that are not as well known. The first is that the bearer’s oldest and closest living male relative must approve of the marriage.”

“Well, that’s most assuredly not happening on either side,” Aegon stated plainly, earning a smile from Lord Stark and his girls.

“We’ve also decided that whoever he marries has to be approved by all of us and our wolves too,” Arya informed him factually. “And you too now. Since you’re family and all.”

“And Jedar,” Aegon added, though he thoroughly approved of this process. At their confused looks he explained. “Jae’s dragon, I’ll introduce you later.”

“And the second,” Oberyn queried bringing the conversation back to the topic.

“Like females, the bearer must have passed their first blood,” he explained awkwardly, clearly not comfortable with the topic. “It is known for bearers to mature later in their life. I do not believe Jon has had his, therefore he is not legally eligible for marriage.”

“You seem well versed in the laws of bearers when it is so scarce,” Connington snarked, glaring at Stark.

“When the possibility of Jon being a bearer came up I had my maester research any and all information on it, including laws. I was not about to let the child I consider a son have no protection,” Stark stated coldly. “Any father with daughters, or children who can give birth would be fools not to know all the laws that can protect them inside and out.”

Connington looked a bit confused, but Oberyn was grinning approvingly and Stokeworth was also nodding.

“I did the same the moment my first daughter was born,” the lord offered jovially. “I wanted to know everything I could lawfully do to any fool that might dare harm my precious daughter. There is surprisingly a lot.”

“I believe it was reformed after Queen Alysanne sat on the throne,” Oberyn advised happily. “Quite
the wily woman that one.”

“If yer grace excuses an old man,” Ser Davos suddenly spoke, bringing attention to him.

“Please,” Aegon directed. “Any suggestions are welcome.”

“I don’t know much about warfare and all the politics you might,” he continued on, if a bit shyly. “However, in my time as a smuggler I’ve learned information is key. It seems to me we don’t have enough of that to truly make any rescue plans. Like Lord Stark stated, timing is gonna be key, but ye need to know what everyone’s doing too. No sense jumping into the water when seven others are doing the same. Ye only end up losing that many more people.”

It was not what Aegon wanted to hear but it was sound. “You’re right Ser, and I thank you for saying it. We need to know what our allies are doing, where our advantages are, and get more allies on our side before we can go after Jae.”

“It is also possible our allies in the Keep may have plans on that front,” Oberyn pointed out. “As Ser Davos said, if we jump without looking, we may ruin the chance we have to get him out.”

Aegon sighed heavily. “Alright. For now we’ll get Lord Stark, his daughters and his people settled. My lord if you could reach out to your son to find out about his plans?”

“Of course your grace,” Lord Stark immediately agreed. “I will also reach out to the Riverlands and the Vale as we have ties with them.”

“I will get in touch with Doran, and my friend Willas Tyrell, we should be able to bring them to our side,” Oberyn mused. “Though it is likely Mace will require a marriage to his daughter…”

Aegon barely refrained from rolling his eyes. However, he knew he would likely have to marry for support. Though it would seriously depend on just what the Reach could bring to the table.

“Ser Wesson, can you reach out to those you can trust in the Stormlands? Maybe find out what the state of them is now that Robert has passed?” Aegon knew it was a gamble, but he hoped Wesson would see the logic of not placing Renly Baratheon on the throne.

“Aye your grace.”

“Jon, reach out to Varys, see if he can give us any information we can use.”

“Of course your grace.” The man seemed angry, yet also proud of how assured Aegon was acting. He knew he would have to have a talk with his foster father at some point.

He continued to dole out instructions to his lords, plans beginning to come together. They would need to get more information and once done they would be better able to make concrete plans. Aegon was both pleased and unhappy.

The worry for his brother gnawed at his gut, yet he would be patient. Jae would never forgive him if he blew his chance to take back the throne by running in headfirst with some hairbrained scheme. Even if it meant possibly losing Jae.

Violet eyes traced the map coming to land on the Red Keep.

“Stay strong Jae,” he whispered determinedly. “I WILL come for you!”
Chapter 70 Jon

By the gods Jon wanted to burn this entire festering hole of a Keep to the ground. The longer he stayed in this snake pit the happier he was to have grown up in the north, even with the treatment he had received there. At least the northerners were honest in their opinions and no one played games with words and actions. The only thing he really had going for him was the fact he actually knew how to play the Game, not that his ‘hosts’ knew that. No, they thought him a pitiful uneducated boy who just happened to be a bearer, which was ‘such’ an ‘honor’ and he should be grateful the king is so ‘merciful’ to spare him despite his ancestry and is even ‘deigning’ to marry him and make him queen.

He had acted surprised when his ancestry came out in the ‘meeting’ Lord Tywin held to explain his ‘good fortune’. He didn’t want them to know he had found the truth, for they would try to find out how, and there were too many people he had to protect. It helped that Jory and the others acted just as shocked, though something about Jory’s frown indicated he might have already known. No one thought a Northman could lie, so didn’t look closer at their actions. Fools.

And surprisingly they really were fools. He had heard near all his life how vicious and cunning Tywin Lannister was, and in some ways this was true. Jon knew the man didn’t give a damn about his bearer status except for what it told him and what opportunities it afforded. Jon may dislike politics but he had learned about them. Aegon especially enjoyed forcing lessons on him so he would not have to suffer alone, much to the ire of Connington.

Jon knew exactly how it had all worked out.

He was captured, the only member of house Stark still in the city after Joffrey and Cersei screwed up their attempt to capture the others. An attempt that was basically a declaration of war on House Stark and the entire north as it was an attack on the Warden. Tywin comes to town to discover their folly, to find one small bonus of a captured bastard and some guards. Not a great catch, however, it is well known how Lord Stark cared for all of his children, even his natural child, so he could still use Jon as a bargaining chip. Not a great one, but it was better than nothing, especially after the loss of his main monster.

No doubt the Lannisters were working on ways to blame the whole fiasco on Lord Stark and his family, however, Jon knew from his ventures into the city that his father and siblings were not just well liked, but actually garnered affection among the small folk.

This is something none of the Lannisters had managed in their time here in the city. The bastard king had even less support than the mad king and that was saying something. It didn’t surprise him the lions would try and rule through fear, thinking it was far better than to rule through the love and respect of the people. What they forgot, is that the people would one day decide the fear was not enough and the risks were worth taking to get rid of said rulers. This was a lesson the Starks had learned long ago and passed on generation to generation. Not every Stark ruler was great, and some fell short of the expectations, but ALL of them had understood that true power lay in the hands of the people and to keep it you had to make the people love you, or at the very least respect you. Once you tried to rule through fear you simply invite your death to come all the sooner. After all, there were far more peasants than nobles, and that class included soldiers.

Then of course that damned maester had to… inspect him.

He shivered at the memory of that old pervert’s touch on his skin. He felt like he needed a bath in scalding water to even come close to stripping the filth away. He knew logically that not all Maesters
held to the neutrality the citadel expected of its members, but Pycelle was certainly a minion of the Lannisters. Sadly, he was also very astute and was able to figure out Jon’s nature rather quickly.

So of course he had to tell Tywin fucking Lannister about it.

On the one hand Jon hated being judged on that little slip of nature, on the other given how ‘sacred’ bearers were to the Seven, perhaps it would offer him some protection (his hands were tied with Jory and the others’ lives depending on his good behavior). He had certainly not expected what Lord Tywin had revealed.

This was something his ancestors had certainly neglected to tell him. Something he made damn sure he would be bringing up with them with very angry words the next time he managed to make it to that realm. Sadly, something about this damned place kept him from being able to reach the in between. He couldn’t even reach Ghost or Jedar, though he could feel Ghost somewhat, making him think his direwolf was in the woods outside the city waiting for him.

When he had first been brought into the Royal Council chambers he expected hearing his status had offered him a higher hostage rating. After all, a bastard son was not nearly worth a trueborn, but one with such a gift would be more than either. The fact he had to be Rhaegar Targaryen’s son was just a sweet addition, since the people of King’s Landing still loved the dragon prince and the Lannisters needed all the help they could get in placating the people.

He had expected the information to be used by Tywin in some fashion, only a fool would dismiss such a trump card, but he had certainly known nothing about the ‘marriage law’, which in his opinion was shit. He especially did not even fathom Lannister would force him to marry Joffrey. Keep him shackled in the Keep, parade him around for good rumors about their family, but marriage?

However, after thinking about it and all the rumors and facts he knew about the ‘king’, he realized Joffrey’s legitimacy was indeed in question and the only way he could truly hope to keep the throne would either be through war, or a marriage to a Targaryen.

By the gods it burned him to be stuck in this position.

Lord Tywin certainly did have him good and trapped, using the Stark men against him to force his cooperation. He must have seen in Jon’s eyes what he was prepared to do to not be used against his family, ‘promised prince’ be damned. So he had killed Martin, much to Jon’s protest. The cold-hearted bastard hadn’t even flinch, just looked at Jon as if he’d simply squashed a bug instead of ended a man’s life and told him the future of the others depended on him.

This… this was the monster who ordered the deaths of his Mother Elia and his dear sister Rhaenys. This was the monster who allowed his men to rape and kill at their pleasure and didn’t even bat an eye. Never before had Jon felt such a deep swell of hate and disgust before that day in the council room. He finally understood why his father hated Tywin Lannister and cursed him to the depths of hell.

However, Jon was a Stark, even if not in name, and the Starks cared about their people. So Jon relented, on the promise that his men would not be harmed and would get the proper food and water they deserved. Tywin had easily acquiesced as if it was natural, but Jon didn’t trust him, so he also bargained that he had to be able to see his men every week to verify their state. The pampered brat of a king and his mother had been very vocal about his daring to make such a demand. Jon held his ground, stating calmly that words were wind, only actions mattered. His eyes had stayed focused on Tywin knowing who had the real power here. The man had actually seemed impressed by him, a fact Lord Tyrion confirmed every time he came to ‘chat’ with Jon.
Now Jon was stuck acting like a puppet, usually kept in his rooms in Maegor’s Holdfast, where all ‘maidens’ stayed. Joffrey, the little prick, had forced him to be groomed in a manner more fitting a betrothed of the king. So he’d been shaved (it took forever to get what whiskers he did have damnit!), bathed, perfumed, his nails painted and his hair pulled and pinned in the fashion women fancied. He’d even been stuffed into the robe-like dressed that were the current trend of the noble women. The worst part, that still left him chilled and shaking with disgust, was the lust he’d seen in the eyes of not only Joffrey, but several of the men attending court, the first time he was presented in such a get up.

He was a MAN! He was not supposed to wear dresses or have men lusting after him like that! Hells even the women gave him looks that were not wholesome. The queen nearly stole his virtue one night with the way she rubbed all over him, her hands in places no one had ever touched before!

Oh gods, if any of his friends heard him now he’d be teased forever for sounding like such a little girl!

He slumped in his chair to pout… BROOD dammit he meant BROOD! Only to flinch in pain.

His scowl deepened as he remembered the recent change in his ‘betrothed’. Lord Tywin had left to rally the Western forces against Riverrun and the North. Apparently neither section had taken the crown’s claim of Lord Stark being a traitor lightly and chose to call banners. Robb had even sent a letter in reply telling the crown, and the bastard king especially, where he could stick his claims. There were also a lot of threats of what would happen to them all if Jon or their people were harmed any further.

It was touching. Idiotic but touching.

Regardless, Joffrey’s temper had been triggered. Now, while Tywin was in the Keep the brat hadn’t dared push his authority more than he already had. Yet the craven grew quite bold the moment his grandfather rode out of the city. He had had Jon dragged before the court and beaten by the Kings Guards for his family’s treason against the crown and the insults against Joffrey personally. The cunt had tried striking Jon himself only once, the blow not even leaving a mark. Did the boy even train?

Nevertheless, Jon took the punishments stoically, staring at Joffrey with a bored look that made the brat even angrier. While such often drew him more punishment, the brat played right into his hands. The nobles and the servants saw just how base and unhinged their ‘king’ was. Those same people often left the Keep to their own homes. Jon had learned news and rumors spread very fast, especially in a city such as this.

The people had calmed and backed down from their unrest against the new king when Jon’s true parentage and status was announced, along with his impending marriage. While they disliked Joffrey, they held hope Jon would be able to do something, and if not him then his children. Many had left flowers at the gates for him, much to the surprise and ire of the Queen. Apparently she had never received such overtures from the people.

Now though, they learned the son of their favored prince, a sacred bearer at that, was being punished, unjustly, by their king. Just like so many had been punished by Aerys.

The people remembered Aerys well, they remembered Rhaeger, and they definitely remembered the kind Stark bastard that walked among them for a short time, helping where he could, who just happened to be the hidden child of their beloved silver prince. The same boy who killed the Mountain, a beast that had been Tywin’s biggest tool in his fear mongering. Suddenly, the unrest was back with a vengeance and the fear was not so overbearing.
He didn’t know if it was funny or sad how neither Joffrey or Cersei figured out just why the people were back to being against them. They were clearly the reason Tywin tried to optimize on Jon’s status. How frustrated the man will be when he learns they still managed to fuck it up.

He had hoped to find a way out of this place, but he was guarded every hour, and he could go nowhere unescorted, for his ‘safety’. Varys had slipped him a few notes, telling him to be patient, however it only frustrated him more than ever. The fact he was unable to escape in his dreams hadn’t helped either.

At least Jory and the others were still well, if stuck in the dungeons. He had worried Joffrey would use them against Jon, but the shortsighted bastard had only thought to humiliate and hurt Jon. Varys had also hinted he would make sure they were well fed and cared for, which Jon had been able to see for himself the few times he’d gone to see them. He’d not been allowed long, but even those few minutes were precious. Given the glares his men through the knights around them and Jory’s very pointed questions, Varys had told them of his own treatment.

“Merow.”

He started slightly biting back a curse at the sound. He looked down to see a giant black form rubbing against his lower legs. Two golden orbs blinked up at him once the beast jumped into his lap making himself at home.

“And where have you been? Off killing mice again,” he questioned softly rubbing between the cat’s ears earning a pleased purr.

It was shortly into his stay here that the blasted cat made himself known to Jon. He’d come curl up with him or beg for attention, only to disappear soon after. Still, Jon enjoyed the small bit of comfort. He missed Jedar and Ghost greatly.

“I think they would like you,” he murmured to the dozing cat. “Though Ghost might be more inclined to eat you. He doesn’t really care for felines. He also gets jealous when I give ear rubs to animals not him. He and Jedar constantly fight about who gets belly rubs at night. Though Jedar is getting a bit too big for them…”

“That is a strange name for an animal.” Jon barely managed not to jump when his current guard spoke. The cat hissed in warning. “Valyrian is it not? Which means you likely knew of your heritage before. I wonder if Lord Stark told you or if you found out on your own.”

Jon didn’t really respond, instead watching at Jamie Lannister walked around the room casually, seeming to inspect it. The man had never deigned to speak to him before, so it seemed odd he would do so now.

“Yet I see he taught you how to glare at those he finds dishonorable,” the man sneered, his greenish eyes boring into Jon’s. “Probably taught you all about honor. I bet he made sure you hated me just as much for sticking my sword in Aerys’ back. Then again you have more reason to be upset as the man was your grandfather.” The knight stopped in front of Jon staring down at him in that haughty manner. “A grandfather who murdered your other grandfather and an uncle. You must be so proud.”

“I don’t care that you killed Aerys,” Jon finally admitted stoically. “And fa… Uncle never speaks of the rebellion or your part in it. I merely know you broke the oath you made when you became a Kingsguard. However,” Jon cut the man off before he could speak. “I was not there when it happened. I do not know your reasoning. It is suspicious given the timing, but I have learned in my travels that one can never know what they will do until they are actually facing a crisis. And words are wind, even those spoken in sacred oaths. So, no I do not care that you struck Aerys down.”
“Then why do you look at me with the same eyes Stark judges me with,” Jamie growled angrily.

“Because while Aerys may have deserved his fate, Princess Elia and her children did not,” Jon informed him calmly, almost tiredly. Jamie flinched back as if struck, shock dancing across his features. “I do not solely blame you. My sire Rhaeger should have left another Kingsguard here with you. There is only so much one man can do. But you did not even TRY to save them.” He let the words linger between them for a moment. “And that is why I look at you with disappointment and disdain.”

“It was war,” he mumbled out, almost as if repeating the words made him actually believe it.

“No, it was murder. Kings and leaders have been overthrown before, and the women and children spared,” Jon corrected, running his hand through the cat’s fur to calm the hissing creature down. “There was no true reason to kill them, except that Lord Tywin wanted them dead. He has been very successful in ruling through fear, however so was Aerys for a time. Joffrey seems to think he can follow in their footsteps.” Jon turned back to the knight. “Fear doesn’t last forever.”

“It is the Game of Thrones,” he responded dully. “You win or you die…”

“Yet it is not the players that suffer is it,” Jon shot back. “It is the people they use as pawns.” Jon made sure his eyes showed just where he thought Jamie was positioned, for the man was clearly a pawn.

“Not that the game will matter once the true enemy comes,” Jon continued on, turning his eyes to the window. “After all, what does a throne matter when there is no kingdom to rule.”

“What are you on about,” Jamie questioned, clearly disbelieving the boy. “There is not enemy but the other houses.”

“You’ve been north,” Jon reminded him. “You’ve seen the preparation they have done. Tell me, do you honestly believe Lord Stark was making those preparations for dealing with the south? A man whose only real concern is his people and surviving the winter?”

“Well, the timing is suspicious.”

Jon snorted when the other man threw his own words in his face.

“Aye, I can see how it would seem so, but let me ask you this.” Jon turned back to him making sure to convey how serious he was. “Why would he bother fortifying the Wall as he is, if he was concerned with fighting the South? Why are the northern lords, with no holds even close to the borders working to safeguard their Keeps and produce as much food as possible?”

“Well, Starks like to harp about winter, it is supposed to be a long one, and perhaps the Wildlings are being extra precocious,” Jamie stated flippantly.

“Except, they have already been let south of the Wall, and they too are preparing for battle.” Jon barely refrained from smirking when he clearly shocked the other man again. “The Free Folk have lived beyond the Wall for thousands of years with no care of coming past it. They have weathered winters we cannot even dream of. Yet they were so desperate that they banded together and were ready to force their way past the Wall to escape death. What could possibly scare people like that?”

“Why don’t you enlighten me as you clearly know,” Jamie snarked, though Jon could see he had a bit of worry in his eyes.

“The Others have awoken and they have the power to raise the dead as their own soldiers.” Jon
pushed on ignoring the way Jamie scoffed. “You don’t have to believe. But all legends have a grain of truth. One merely needs to look back far enough. Besides, Free Folk and Giants are as mortal as you or I. They can be killed just like anyone else. So why was a wall, over 700 feet tall made of ice and stone built? Spanning miles of some of the most dangerous and inhospitable terrain in Westeros? No one wastes resources like that for imaginary creatures or made up enemies. No one.”

Jamie said nothing, but Jon could tell he had sparked his interest and even given him something to truly think about.

“If you will excuse me Ser, I believe I will retire,” Jon stated wanting this ‘conversation’ to be over. “I am sure the… king will wish to have another audience with me tomorrow and I need rest from his last temper tantrum.”

Surprisingly the man did not try and defend Joffrey, instead he actually looked ashamed. Of course if Jon’s child ever acted like such a ninny he’d have taken the brat over his knee ages ago. The knight merely nodded and headed for the door.

“Balerion,” he said suddenly catching Jon off guard.

“Pardon?”

“That’s the beast’s name,” he informed him, nodding to the cat still lingering in Jon’s lap. “He belonged to Princess Rhaenys. It seems fitting he allows you near him. You might as well know his name.”

Jon nodded in thanks and Jamie left, closing the door securely behind him. “Balerion eh? A good name for such a fearsome creature.”

The Black Dread merely purred in reply, demanding more scratches before he would let Jon find any rest.
Chapter 71 Sandor

Sandor Clegane was not an eloquent man, nor was he a nice one. He still followed his duties as a knight and treated people decently enough. He certainly didn’t go about killing and raping like his cunt of a brother did…had. Gods he loved remembering that part. He only wished he’d been there to see that slip of a boy bring his arsehole of a brother down. Those soldiers he managed to question about it had given him somewhat pleasing accounts, but he still wished he’d seen it.

For so long he had focused on ridding the world of his brother, the man who had tried to kill him as a boy leaving him horribly scarred. The man who had found ways to kill their mother and father, blaming it on accidents. The man who had sold their sister off to Iron Born and killed their tiny nephew she had birthed shortly before that.

He remembered how people used to say House Clegane was blessed having such a fearsome warrior as his brother. However he knew the truth. They had been cursed. His brother had singlehanded brought their house to near extinction. Considering no woman that wasn’t a paid whore would lay with Sandor due to their disgust of his face, and none had survived a night with his brother, it likely was the end of House Clegane.

He also couldn’t forget he was stuck as the sworn shield for the most arrogant cunt in the kingdom was also a downside. The fucker hadn’t even bothered to give Sandor a position on the King’s Guards, despite him protecting his stupid arse for years. Not that he would accept the position. There wasn’t anyone worth serving with anymore. Barristan was discharged, Lannister was an oath breaker and sister-fucker, and the rest of the cunts were stupid boorish arses that enjoyed harming others instead of upholding the honor of the ancient order. This king wasn’t worth serving either. Baratheon had been a pathetic king, but he had nothing on the sadistic brat now in charge.

He’d known for a while there was something wrong with the boy. He’d enjoyed cutting up animals and harming his younger siblings. Gregor had enjoyed such things as well. Thank the gods Joffrey had a pathetic build and couldn’t really do much damage to others physically. Then again, he just had to order people to do the dirty work for him. He’d been pleased when the Stark girl had not fallen for his golden prince routine. The little bird was smarter and fiercer than she let on hiding it behind a polite façade. The youngest one was a pure wolf, all teeth and claws. She was a bit annoying, but he kind of liked her.

It seemed the North knew how to raise their pups. He’d seen it in the Stark girls and again in the bastard boy that had slain his brother. When he first saw him he’d thought there was no way this waif had done what he could not. Then he looked into those dark grey eyes and he knew. This boy was a warrior, filled with quiet strength and confidence that only someone who had been in battle could portray. He could also tell this boy had earned his abilities through hard work and experience, something Joffrey could never boast. Sandor respected that and had found himself begrudgingly liking the boy.

When the truth had come out about his true birth parents and status he hadn’t cared. In fact, he thought it was hilarious that Lord Stark got one over Baratheon. The old fat king had harped on the Targaryens for years, cursing them for all his problems. Yet, Lord Stark managed to hide his enemy’s son, the son said enemy had with the king’s ‘greatest’ love. The fat fuck deserved it. He’d never condoned the killing of Princess Elia and her children. It hadn’t been war as Tywin liked to preach, it’d been an execution pure and simple. Not that one could expect different from the man who handled the Reynes and Tarbecks. Sandor couldn’t exactly speak out against his liege lord either, even if he hated the cold fuck.
However, Tywin at least understood how to take care of a hostage, especially one as important as the boy just became. Cersei and Joffrey clearly didn’t. It wasn’t long after Tywin left to deal with the descension in the Riverlands that Joffrey started having the boy beaten.

Sandor had to bite his lip to keep from laughing when Joffrey’s pathetic hit barely moved the boy. The pussy had to resort to having his knights strike the boy. He had tried to get Sandor to do so once, but a cool look had the brat changing his mind. Sandor would not hit an unarmed man who clearly had done nothing wrong.

His respect for the Targaryen boy grew with each beating he took. He never cried, he never faltered and he never gave Joffrey the satisfaction the boy King so desperately wanted. Even when he was clearly hurt he stood tall and unflinching. The fact he took most of his punishments so stoically to protect the men loyal to his uncle's house was even more impressive.

Sandor didn’t know any lord that would truly stand up for the small folk, regardless if they were sworn to them or not. The Lannisters certainly didn’t, more than ready to throw any of their men under the wagon to further their own agendas. The Starks were clearly of a different make. He had heard the rumors about it, not believing them, until now. While he may have been part Targaryen he clearly identified with his Stark blood more, showing all who watched that he stood for the values of the north and the people.

The king was an idiot for not seeing what his actions were causing, the queen was not helping either. The servants talked, as all servants do, and now the people in the city had heard of the beatings and how the boy protected his own. The peasants were becoming more displeased with their ruler by the day. There was even talk of getting the boy out of the Keep and spiriting him away. Nothing concrete, but it was there.

He might have worried about what Joffrey and the queen would do when they heard such things. However, their attention was being taken by other more pressing rumors.

The North had, rightfully, denied Joffrey’s decree and basically declared war. The Riverlands falling in line. The Vale was suspiciously silent, but that snake Baelish was there so was likely working his magic on Lady Arryn. He’d seen how the mockingbird had played the Hand’s wife to his own tune. How the woman didn’t see the man was clearly using her he didn’t know. Then again that woman had never been quite right from what he’d seen. Hells, last time he saw her here she was breastfeeding her son still, and the lad was near five name days!

He’d also heard that Renly Baratheon was declaring himself king, citing that after Robert he would be the best choice as Joffrey and his siblings were bastards instead of trueborn. Ignoring the fact he still had one older brother, the young fop wouldn’t have been much of an issue, except it seemed Mace Tyrell was backing him. Or more likely Loras Tyrell was supporting his lover and trying to get his family to do the same. There was also word of the Stark boy making offers of marriage to Tyrell to gain alliance. The fat flower must be loving how in demand he was these days.

The strange fact was how silent Dragonstone was. He’d expected some kind of declaration from Stannis Baratheon after Robert’s death. The man had clearly cottoned on to the truth before Arryn’s death, so why hadn’t he made a move? A question no one in the court was currently asking, at least aloud. He had a feeling Varys knew more but was keeping it close to the chest. That damned eunuch was far too slippery.

Well no skin off his back. They could all go around killing themselves off, not his problem. In fact he had half a mind to leave this hellhole. Seemed pointless to stay. His brother was dead, he hated the cunt of a king now ruling, he hated the nobles and fake knights hanging around said king… Really he hated just about everybody and everything.
Except roasted chicken. Yeah… he liked roasted chicken. In fact he’d go to the kitchens later, there was one cook that did it just right, leaving it tender and juicy, with just enough spice…

Mmmm, chicken…

The knock on the door took him from his thoughts as the king ordered the person into his solar. He really needed to get away from this brat.

After diner.

The Grand Maester Pycelle shuffled in, his chains clinking in their annoying fashion. The man should have been dismissed years ago, but the Lannisters kept their dogs close. How he hated this perverted child fucker.

“Did you find what I want,” Joffrey demanded petulantly, obviously not realizing he sounded like a child throwing a fit.

“I believe I have found a concoction that can work your grace,” the man simpered. “However, it must be used in small doses or it can harm…”

“I don’t care if it harms the freak. I only care that it works,” he snapped. “He’s not going to be of any use much longer, and I want a taste before disposing of him.”

“Your grace I must council against this,” the man sputtered. So he does have some backbone, who knew? “Your grandfather…” Nevermind…

“My grandfather is not here,” Joffrey sneered childishly. “And I am the KING. No stupid law is going to take that from me, nor is it going to force me to marry some freak when I deserve the best Lady from our loyal houses. My mother said so! Once the northern barbarians are squashed under grandfather’s army, the others will fall in line as they should have from the beginning and I will not need that Targaryen bastard,” he spat the word Targaryen out much like Robert had in the past.

“Well, no, Robert would have likely killed the boy on sight. Then again, he did look enough like Lyanna Stark from what he was told the old king might have kept the boy as a whore. Cersei would have ‘loved’ that.

“Your grace, I understand punishing those who stand against your family, however the boy is a bearer and the Faith…”

“I AM THE KING,” Joffrey screamed angrily interrupting the Maester again. “The Faith will do as I say! If I wish to punish the freak then I will do so! There is not proof that bearers are divine but drivel written centuries ago by old men who are no longer relevant! If I say they are nothing but freaks then they are nothing but freaks!”

“Of course your grace,” the man yielded with a cowering bow.

“Now leave the vial and get out. If you’re lucky I might let you taste the freak before I dispose of
him,” Joffrey commanded, voice going back to his normal level.

Once the door closed Joffrey picked up the vial filled with cloudy blue liquid. His smirk had Sandor feeling uncomfortable for the boy this elixir was meant for.

“Father always said a good horse or hunting hound had to be broken in,” he muttered viciously. “If beating and training doesn’t work then you have to find another way to get the beast to submit. I suppose I shouldn’t have expected the typical ways to work like they do on everyone else. He is a wolf and a dragon, not a lowly dog like you, eh Hound,” the brat addressed to him with his sleazy grin. “But this will have that mongrel bastard on his knees surrendering to my every demand. Now I just have to decide the best place to display his defeat. Perhaps in front of the court, or even on the steps of the Sept of Baylor. That would show the peasants who is in charge!”

And cause a riot, you dumb fucker.

Sandor barely managed to not roll his eyes at the fool. Yes, he would be getting out of this city sooner than later. However, he’d make sure to get the boy out as well. He owed it to him for killing his brother, even if technically he had taken what was Sandor’s.

Seemed like it was time to talk to a certain spy master.
“So how many today Grandmother,” Margery Tyrell asked as she entered her elder brother Willas’ solar to see him and their grandmother going over missives. The rose of High Garden had found herself in high demand the past year or so, with several lords begging her father for her hand in marriage. Of course, they were holding out for the very best proposal, such as the Crown Prince, as Margery had been groomed to be queen.

“The usual monthly request from Lord Ashford and Lord Redwyne,” Lady Olenna informed her curtly. “Lord Varner is looking to catch Loras, as if that’ll happen. Though I have heard his daughter looks more like a man than a woman, so perhaps there IS a chance.”

“Grandmother,” Margery scolded playfully, leaning down to kiss her cheek. Willas snorted but said nothing, used to his grandmother’s rather blunt assessments. “Speaking of Loras, has there been any word?”

“Yes,” Willas answered this time, looking quite put out. “The fools is still convinced Renly has a chance and he wants to secure us through a betrothal.” He passed the letter over to their grandmother, allowing both women to read it. “Clearly he is not aware of certain facts, or he is just ignoring them all together.”

“ Probably the latter,” Lady Olenna muttered in annoyance. “That boy is not thinking with the right head in this matter. Please tell me my oaf of a son has not seen this?”

“No, I made sure to intercept all missives from Loras,” Willas assured her. “Especially in light of the latest notification from the crown.”

“What announcement,” Margery asked, disliking the fact she had not heard of this before. Willas handed it over easily enough allowing her to peruse the lengthy document. Her eyes grew wide as she read it again to make sure she understood what was being said. “Is this true?”

“Yes, I had the information verified,” Olenna informed her tiredly. “Which is why we have said nothing of it as of yet. I have to hand it to Stark, he really is the only one who could have pulled this off. Damn shame that man didn’t take the crown when he had the chance, he’d have made a much better ruler than that braggart Robert.”

“So Prin… King Joffrey is going to marry this Jon Snow, the supposed son of Rhaeger Targaryen and Lyanna Stark,” Margery questioned, still trying to wrap her head around it. “Because he is a bearer and the last true son of Rhaeger?”

“Yes and no,” Olenna hinted with a smirk. “It seems the rumors about Joffrey’s true parentage has more strength to is than previously thought. No doubt Tywin wants to nip those whispers in the bud, and this gave him the perfect opportunity. With a proven Targaryen as his ‘wife’ no one will question his continued rule, or even care about his true origins. It is quite savvy on Tywin’s part. However, I believe the old lion is going to find all his plans for not.”

“How so…”

“MOTHER! Willas! What’s this I hear about you denying Loras help,” Mace Tyrell bellowed as he barged into the room with his second son Garlan following a step behind.

“Apologies,” Garlan stated calmly. “Loras decided to be sneaky and send a letter to mother to give to father.”
“Well, at least he has some wits,” Olenna muttered before staring at her blundering offspring. “Sit down Mace and stop your blustering. There is a very good reason for not supporting Baratheon.”

Mace glared at his mother for a second before sitting down huffily in the chair next to hers. His children all shared amused looks. They loved their father dearly, but even they knew who really ran High Garden.

“Willas, catch your father up please,” She ordered as she sipped at her tea. Ever the dutiful grandson he did just that, explaining the letter from the crown and the new information.

“So… so my golden rose won’t be queen,” he muttered petulantly.

“For Joffrey or Renly, no,” Olenna told him point blank. “However, there is still a chance.”

“Are you thinking of removing Joffrey and putting this Jon Snow on the throne and marrying Margery to him,” Willas offered, clearly not too opposed to the idea. It could theoretically work, as he was a proven heir to Rhaeger.

“While it is a thought, that is actually not the next step,” she informed them wryly before pulling out two pieces of parchment. “I received two rather interesting missives last night and was waiting to discuss them with you all.” Now that she had the full attention of her family she continued, far more pleased than she likely had a right to be, but as an old woman she deserved her fun. “The first is from Lord Robb Stark, requesting a betrothal with the family for an alliance. He did not specify that he was looking for Margery’s hand,” she added interrupting her son from his complaints. In fact it seems more likely he is looking for a match with one of his sisters. I have heard rather good things about the eldest daughter.” Here she let her eyes linger on Willas, silently letting him know she was tired of the next Lord of High Garden being a bachelor.

“And the other,” he countered, clearly not amused with her thought process. Not that it mattered, she’d bring him around.

“The other is a bit more interesting and hard to believe. However, there are a few additions to the letter from very trustworthy sources that make me have hope.”

“Grandmother,” Margery nearly begged for her to get on with it.

“It is from Prince Aegon Targaryen, son of Rhaeger and Elia Martell,” she dropped that lovely piece of information enjoying the shocked looks all around. “Confirmed by Lord Stark, Prince Oberyn and even Lord Velaryon. It seems he has returned to claim his rightful throne. He also noted he was quite put out by Joffrey Water’s capture of his dear brother Jaehaerys Targaryen. He has indicated he would be very generous to house that ally with him to stop the Lannisters and free his sibling. Enough to marry a daughter of our house.”

“But… But Loras has declared for Renly Baratheon,” Mace mumbled pathetically. His love of his children warring with his greed for a Targaryen husband for his daughter.

“We all know Renly is not King material,” Willas spoke up, his voice sure and commanding as a Lord should be. “While I love my brother, he is making this decision solely based on his feelings for Renly and not for the good of our family or our people. If this really is Aegon Targaryen, then he will have the Crownlands and Dorne with him automatically. That Lord Stark has put his name on the letter as well suggests the North will join his side, and that is NOT a small portion of this kingdom. Lord Robb’s letter also suggests they are looking to fight the Lannisters. The Riverlands and the Vale would fall in line as they are allied with the North through strong ties. We would be foolish to stand against that.”
“Exactly,” Olenna added her weight to the conversation. “While I have heard the Vale may be swayed otherwise since the death of their liege lord, Aegon will have at least four of the seven Kingdoms on his side. I also know there is great unrest in Kings landing according to my spies. The new ‘King’ is not treating Prince Jaehaerys properly for his station and special circumstances. Apparently now that Tywin is away from the Keep that boy’s true nature is coming out. I would not be surprised if the small folk rise up to depose the brat themselves.”

“Regardless there will be war,” Margery murmured worriedly, her eyes going to her brother Garlan who will be expected to lead their forces. While he was an accomplished knight he had never been in true battle, many of their forces had not.

“Yes, and this time we cannot just suit on our asses,” Olenna stated sternly, eyes narrowed on her firstborn son. “We will have to fight.”

“We fought for the Targaryens,” he argued.

“No, you laid siege to a castle and feasted until Stark came to break it up. Then when the Greyjoy’s rebelled you procrastinated to the point we almost lost our titles,” she reminded him harshly. “We cannot make such choices this time around. We either give our all or we stay out of it all together and risk losing everything to whoever wins.”

“Then I say we throw our lot in with the Targaryens,” Garlan voiced strongly. “It was their house that gave us our titles. It was their house we swore true fealty to. Had Rhaeger not died we would follow them still. Now we have two sons of his, both with mothers not from the same house as Rhaeger. Both carrying blood from the great houses of Westeros. Surely these men will prove better that Aerys and most definitely the Lannisters.” None of them had seen Garlan so passionate before about politics. He preferred to remain quiet and do his duty to his people and family. For him to speak up meant quite a bit. “For too long the Lannisters have ruled with fear and cruelty. I have seen what his monsters have done to our small folk on the borders of our land but I have been unable to do anything in fear of offending the royals. Now we have a chance to cut them down.”

“Son, Tywin Lannister is a dangerous man, his pet monster even more so,” Mace started worriedly, trying to calm his boy down. “If we go against him he will send the Mountain to ravage our lands.”

“Actually he won’t.” Olenna grinned wickedly at them all. “Did you not hear Mace? Gregor Clegane is dead. He was slain by Prince Jaehaerys Targaryen when he helped his mother’s family flee King’s Landing. It was how he was captured.”

“Then for that service alone the young prince deserves our service,” Garlan pushed. “Gods know the small folk will already be singing his praises for ending that beast.”

“It would raise our standing with our own people to praise him for the feat,” Margery added. “He has committed many crimes and many of our own lords were unhappy that we have been unable to do much let alone even speak out against Lord Tywin and his pet.”

“It also helps to make people less afraid of Lannister and his army,” Willas mused thoughtfully. “Without one of his biggest weapons, his power no longer seems greater than ours. Knowing even his beast can be felled will give the soldiers hope and courage when battling his army.”

“Then we should write back to Prince Aegon and Lord Stark and request meeting to discuss alliances,” Olenna declared. “We do not have to make any promises, but we should hear them out.”

“But… but Loras,” Mace stuttered out.
“Will have to make a choice,” Willas informed his father gently. “We cannot just ally with Renly simply because Loras loves him. We must do what is best for our people and our family. Renly is not either. We will try to bring him back to the fold, mayhaps even convince Renly he would be better off siding with us and Prince Aegon, but we cannot back him as King.”
chapter 73 Oswell

Oswell was practically climbing the walls of the small room he was staying in. He had finally healed enough that he could move around normally and even fight if necessary. However, the long days of hearing little to no news of his prince was killing him. What tidbits Varys did send them was not helpful at all. Instead Oswell wanted to storm the bloody Keep and show that Lannister bitch and her brood the true meaning of pain. He burned with each report of the new King’s Guard beating his prince, or the ‘king’ finding some way to humiliate Jon. And Jon just took it, because he had people depending on his good behavior to keep them alive. And damned if Oz wasn’t proud of the boy for taking it all to protect those he could.

Truly Jon had proven time and again he was what a prince should be, what any man should be.

Selmy felt the same after having heard about Jon’s adventures with Oz and Art. He’d been shocked to learn of the survival of the Dayne siblings and young Aegon. His eyes had lit up with a fire he hadn’t seen they’d first been reacquainted. It seemed the weight of the White Cloak had worn the man down even more each year. Serving two horrible rulers in a row left a mark on him.

At least he got to go out into the city and gather information from the people and Varys’ birds. It still amazed him how willing the people were to help a Targaryen, but they had loved Rhaeger and now his son, who had proven to be just as kind when he’d been among them. There were even rumors from servants in the Keep telling how he would stand up for the help when the king or some highborn tried to harm a servant unjustly. A captive himself, he still refused to allow innocents to be harmed.

Joffrey and Cersei had no clue just how far their reputations had dropped these past weeks with their treatment of Jon. Since Tywin was away there was no one to curb their behavior, which sucked anyway. Varys tried to help where he could and many of the servants would do what they could for the young prince, but they knew it was only a matter of time.

In fact the latest intel that Varys had brought them was not promising in the least. Apparently Joffrey was planning to make an example of the prince. It would involve a drug of some sort that Maester Pycelle had cooked up. Gods that man should have been killed years ago, the old pervert. Oz had hated him even when he served Aerys.

He tensed when the door opened, hand going to his sword, only to relax when he saw Selmy.

“Well, what’s the word?”

“The King has announced a gathering tomorrow at the Sept of Baylor” Selmy informed him tiredly. “No one can say what the gathering is for, but it does not bode well. Varys is getting things ready for us tom make our move. We will need to act to save the prince.”

“Aye,” Oz agreed. “We should have help form the people, even if there are a good number of gold
cloaks and red cloaks in the area. Some distractions ought to serve us well.” He thought over the various plans they had come up with. “Varys will get the Stark men out?”

“And to the rendezvous point,” Selmy concurred. “We also have a rather unexpected ally in Sandor Clegane.”


“Aye, but they had no love for each other,” Selmy reminded him. “Though I was worried the man would have felt cheated by Jon, he actually has grown to respect the prince. Apparently he feels anyone who can take the abuse he has with that kind of stoic maturity and still remain kind to the servants deserves his respect. Considering how much that man hates people in general its damn near amazing the prince earned anything but annoyed acceptance.” Selmy hesitated a moment before pushing forward. “Plus he’s tired of the ‘little cunt that calls himself king’.”

Oz snorted in amusement. “That is not a man to mince words.”

“Indeed,” the other knight agreed wryly.

“Do we have horses and supplies ready for us,” Oz moved on, focusing on the plans.

“Aye, just outside the city.” Selmy pulled out a map showing the location. “Then we can ride for Maidenpool, and hopefully meet up with some of Aegon’s supporters.”

“We’ll make it,” Oz muttered determinedly. “We have to. Too much rests on Jon’s survival.”

Selmy didn’t comment on it, not that Oswell blamed him. No doubt the other knight still had a hard time believing all he had learned about the threat to the north. Then again it’s easier to understand the threat of people one can see and actually knows about. The threat of an enemy that’s been a fairy tale for years? A bit harder to swallow.

Well it didn’t matter. That was neither here nor now. The biggest concern was getting to Jon and getting the hell out of this blasted city.

Xxx

The area before the Great Sept was filled to the brim with people pushing and moving trying to get a good spot to see what would occur. Many thought perhaps the King was going to marry Prince Jon Snow to secure his throne before the people. Others thought perhaps it was simply the King making a spectacle of himself, he definitely took after Robert Baratheon that way. Others however were worried. King Joffrey was not the type of man to do anything kind or beneficial to others and they had heard the rumors of his treatment of Rhaeger’s last known heir. Regardless of their reasons, everyone was curious to see if they could catch a look at Rhaeger’s last living son.

Oz shifted nervously, not liking how dense the crowd was. It would prove difficult to move quickly when trying to grab Jon. On the other hand, it would also hinder the Lannister forces. Granted those men had no issues with hurting the innocent, much like their King and Queen Mother. Next to him Selmy stood calm and steady as a mountain. Sometimes Oz wanted to hit him when he got like that, but in truth it merely meant the old knight was preparing for battle. So it was best not to distract him.

He knew logically Varys has his birds all throughout the crowd and even within the Sept. Still, it was very hard to not feel completely alone in this task when one did not know the names and faces of their allies.
The doors to the Great Sept opened and out came several of the Lannister men dressed in gold and some in red. The High Septon then stepped out, followed by two of the Kingsguard and then the king himself with his mother and the members of the High Council, those still in the city that is.

Oz had to grit his teeth when he saw Ser Jamie, looking so arrogant as he walked just behind the Queen Mother. Gods how he hated and felt sorry for the boy. He’d been taken into the Kingsguard so young and as a way to leash Tywin. The boy had thought it such an honor, until his first time having to guard Aerys as he raped his wife. The boy had had his innocent dreams of true knights stolen far too quickly as he served in the hell hole that was the Red Keep. In truth Oz hadn’t even blamed him for sticking a sword ion Aerys’ back, gods knew he had wanted to several times. He could forgive him that broken oath, but not his broken promise to Rhaeger to protect Elia and her children. That he would never forgive the lion for.

When Jon finally came out, it was only Selmy’s steady hand on his arm that kept him from rushing forward. The boy looked horrid. His face was gaunt as if he had not eaten enough, his skin was paler than normal, easily showcasing the bruises which spanned the rainbow of deep dark purple to sickly yellow. Worse he was unable to walk on his own, two regular gold cloaks nearly dragged him between them as they came forward, the remaining Kingsguard following behind. Something was wrong, no matter how tired or injured Jon had been in the past he would always walk strong, he was that stubborn. However, now it was like he could not even control his own limbs.

“It seems Varys’ information was correct. The prince has been drugged,” Selmy whispered into his ear.

“But by what and how much,” Oz growled back. “Knowing that inbred brat he wouldn’t care if he inadvertently killed Jon.”

“Varys managed to get a sample to one of his people, they are working on a way to counter it,” Selmy advised. “Though I do not know if they were able to, and even so we may not have time to administer it before we need to flee.”

“So we’ll be playing it by ear,” Oz surmised. “Great. If only Luwin were still alive, he’d have known right away, the sly bastard.”

“Aye, he did have a way with potions and poisons,” Selmy remarked wistfully. “But so does his nephew Oberyn. We will simply have to hurry and get the prince to him.”

The High Septon called out a prayer and everyone quieted. Jon was brought to the center of the square, much like a prisoner about to be executed. King Joffrey stood tall on the dais, looking out arrogantly at his people.

“As many of you know, this bastard, Jon Snow was captured after he killed several honorable Lannister men. It was discovered that not only is he the sinful product of rape after the late Prince Rhaeger kidnapped and dishonored the also late Lady Lyanna Stark, but he is a bearer,” the boy spoke out, his voice high pitched and oozing with haughtiness. Whispers echoed through the crowd before the brat held his hands up to silence the people. “Now, some would tell you a bearer is sacred, but this is false!”

The High Septon startled as if he was unaware of where this was leading too. The fool clearly had been told something else. Oz noted Jamie seemed startled as well, though Cersei looked more than a tad smug. The people became restless, not liking the atmosphere the king’s announcement was taking. The boy was trying to defy decades of religious belief, a very stupid and dangerous move.

“This belief was started by the Targaryens,” Joffrey continued, so sure of himself. “But we know
those dragons were beyond foolish, breeding with their own brothers and sisters, producing mad kings and delusional bastards. Even worse they produced abominations like this boy here! Men are not supposed to bear children! It is a crime against the gods! The Mother is not male! Nor is the Maiden or the Crone! If bearers were meant to be then the gods would share in their image, but they do not! It is sick and monstrous that such a being has been created! It perverts the natural order of things!"

Now people were really making noise. Joffrey clearly thought he had the people on his side, proving he could not read a crowd accurately. In truth the people were becoming upset, especially as the High Septon was looking very alarmed at what the boy was sprouting. Seemed the brat hadn’t listened in his lessons about the Seven.

“And this creature here only proves how debased bearers and bastards truly are!” He gestured to the two guards next to Jon and they stripped the robe he was wearing clean off, displaying his lean body to the entire crowd. Like his father’s family he was lithe and lean, his muscles corded for speed. He had little hair except for a thin trail down to his crotch where a small patch rested above his cock. He carried a few scars, proving he had been in battle, something Joffrey could not boast. Even more bruises decorated his torso and whip marks stood out prominently on his back, clearly from his time captive in the Red Keep. The fool King just showed his people how he ‘cared’ for those in his home and supposedly under the protection of the crowd. Truly the only damning thing on Jon was the blue tattoo he received from Drogo, showing he was an honorary member of his Khalasar.

Jon just swayed a bit, eyes not focused in the least. Oz watched as the boy blinked and tried to clear his head, no doubt fuzzy from whatever he was given. When he listed a bit too far to one side, one of the guards forced him to his knees in a very painful manner.

Many in the crowd were curious, and offended at Jon’s treatment, but none were disgusted like Joffrey had intended. In fact, Oz wanted to curse the dumb cunt, because he could see lust in the eyes of several men and women in the crowd. It was hard enough protecting Jon’s innocence and the Lannister by-blow just made his job harder!

“Clearly he was made only for the pleasure of others,” Joffrey continued on. “He has even allowed himself to be used by the Dothraki, having them mark him, no doubt as one of their whores!”

That did have the crowd murmuring, unsure what to think. Not much was known by the people of Westeros about the Dothraki except they were fierce and they did take slaves. Oz wanted to roll his eyes, even if he could admit preying on the fears of the unknown was a good political move.

“Isn’t that right, bitch,” Joffrey addressed Jon. “Tell the people how you were used a plaything for those barbarians. I command you to speak.”

The crowd grew silent wondering just what the young prince would say. Jon managed to lift his head, though Oz could tell it took a lot of effort for him.

“Dothraki… do not… mark… slaves,” he stated as best he could. His voice was far more gravely than usual speaking of little use. “Only… warriors… wear… their… colors.”

Oz smirked as he saw several men in the crowd nodding at that logic. The houses had colors and sigils, so it made sense the different tribes of the Dothraki would have something like that too. Weren’t soldiers of the different houses marked to show who they served? That didn’t make them slaves, it just showed who they were allied to.

Oz watched as Joffrey’s face grew red in fury as his plan to defame Jon was not working. Fool should have thought it through some more. He definitely did not inherit any of the Lannister cunning.
“LIES! I know you are a whore,” Joffrey shouted, ignoring his mother who was trying to whisper in his ear. “Guards! Show him the price of lying to his king!”

The gold cloaks next to Jon looked unsure but they obeyed the command anyway, striking Jon across the face, nearly toppling the boy. The other kicked him hard in the abdomen. They hit him a few more times to ensure obedience. Oz longed to lodge his sword into their guts in the most painful way possible.

When they were done, one grabbed Jon by his hair, forcing him to face Joffrey.

“Perhaps that has taught you not to lie to your king,” Joffrey stated pompously. “Now, bastard, tell the people the truth. Tell them you are a whore and an abomination to the gods. I COMMAND you!”

Oz frowned as Jon seemed to shudder at the word command. Was that it? Was the potion he was fed some sort of concoction that forced him to obey when a certain word was spoken? He’d never heard of such a brew before. He’d seen a lot of things in Essos, potions that forced one to tell the truth, others that made men forget years’ worth of memories and even some that stole the ability to speak. All of them were cowardly ways to force a man to one’s will, yet this Oz considered the worst.

“I… am…” Jon started to speak, clearly having trouble. Oz couldn’t quite see his face, but he knew the boy was fighting. Jon was strong, he would beat this. “NOT a whore,” he yelled out the rest, breathing hard as if he just got out of a battle.

Joffrey near screamed in impotent rage as he stomped forward, pushing off his guard and his mother. He forced Jon’s head back and took a bottle from his pocket and forced the full contents down Jon’s throat.

“Your grace, you mustn’t,” Pycelle gasped out in warning.

“Your grace! You can’t treat a bearer this way,” The High Septon added, he and his fellows looking even more alarmed. “The Seven forbid…”

“Do not tell me what to do! I AM THE KING!” Joffrey glared at those around him, his eyes shining with a crazed light. “HE WILL OBEY ME! I COMMAND IT!”

Jon started to convulse, his body spasming sharply as the potion worked through him. People were screaming and yelling, not liking this scene at all. The guards were trying to keep the people back, who started to surge forward in their anger at the King’s actions.

The council members were looking more than a bit worried, and Cersei was clearly snarling at Jamie to get Joffery under control.

“Get ready to move,” Selmy informed him, clearly seeing something Oz had missed. Not that it was hard since Oz was focused on Jon.

Suddenly the dais erupted in clouds of dusty smoke, a tactic used in Essos. He could hear Joffrey screaming in fear, and Jamie trying to order the knights with Cersei’s own yells drowning him out. In the crowd several men and woman distracted the gold cloaks, some falling to hidden daggers and other simply being kept from the dais with large number of bodies in one space. Miraculously the way before them just opened up and Oz moved as fast as he could, Selmy right next to him.

They worked seamlessly, as if they had not been separated for years. Any Lannister men that got in
their way were cut down ruthlessly. Once they made it to the dais they easily handled the guards trying to hold onto Jon, who laid prone on the floor, body still shaking violently from the concoction. The smoke was clearing enough to see the enemies around them.

Joffrey was still screaming but not really doing much in the chaos. Selmy dispatched the two guards right next to Jon, and Oz was pleased to see he did so in a very painful manner. Oz swung his sword to take out the damned brat once and for all, only for another to catch his. Suddenly he found himself staring at Jamie Lannister, those green eyes widening in shock and horror.

“Hello brat, missed me,” Oz taunted as he easily threw Jamie’s sword aside. He knew he would have to be quick, Jamie was still one of the best and Oz had a limited time before the man’s shock wore off. Sadly the man was better than before, managing to gather himself enough to counter Oz’s next strike. It didn’t help that Joffrey was now also trying to swing his sword at him, albeit in a very sloppy manner. Selmy had his hands full with the few guards close enough to try and storm the dais. The other Kingsguards were also getting closer, but seemed to have their hands full with getting the council and the queen to safety.

Oz traded blows with Jamie and knocked the stupid boy king away from him a few times like the annoying fly he was. However, he knew if they did not hurry up they would miss their chance.

Suddenly Joffrey cried out in pain, before he was bodily picked up and thrown into Jamie, the other having to drop his sword so as not to injury the child. The throw was hard enough to send both of them off the raised dais and to the ground below. Oz blinked turning to find Sandor Clegane standing there with a rather satisfied look on his face.

“Been wanting to do that for ages,” the man admitted before he turned around, and lifted Jon over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Despite the boy’s thrashing Clegane held him steady and was able to move forward. “Let’s get out of here.”

Oz followed the other man through down to the crowd and through the streets away from the Great Sept. It seemed no matter which way they turned the crowd would split and the way would clear. The few guards that tried to stop them were easily dispatched or waylaid.

They veered down one pathway making for the Gate of the Gods. Oz worried they would be caught by the guards there only to find them already in pitched battle, the few who were holding the gate easily taken. It seemed Joffrey had lessened the security on the gates to have more guards at his little spectacle. More of the strange dust bombs had been used here and several fires were going. In the chaos their group slipped out of the gates and off to the housing.

“’bout time you showed up,” a very familiar voice drawled.

“I’ll be damned,” Oz chuckled as he caught sight of Bronn sitting smugly on a horse. He should have known those dust bombs were his, the man loved using dirty tactics. “What in the seven hells are you doing here you bastard!”

“Came to save my apprentice,” he stated primly. “I put a lot of work into that brat.”

Oz didn’t even bother correcting the brigand, too happy this seemed to be working. He could see the surviving Stark men helping get Jon on a horse, the one he thought was called Jory sitting behind the boy and holding him securely. A cloak had been wrapped around him to protect his nude form, which had gone worryingly still.

“He’s breathing, but it’s labored,” Jory told him when he saw Oz staring in concern.
“We’ll deal with that once he get further down the road,” Selmy reminded him. “We need to go now!”

Shaking his head to get his mind straight, Oz swung up on the horse provided for him. Soon their group was galloping down the road, far from the chaos they had left behind, their prince secure.
Chapter 74 Jon

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the lateness of this. I have been having writer's block. So the next chapters may take a while. I hope the new season will help inspire me. :) Thanks for your patience.

Jon was falling, or it felt like it. Only nothing seemed to stop him. His mind whirled around him and he couldn’t grasp a single thought. His body hurt and his head even more so. He kept hearing the word ‘command’ and part of him wanted to obey whatever came after, but the rest of him wanted to rebel. His stomach turned harshly and a sour taste coated his mouth and throat.

The last thing he remembered was Joffrey and being outside. The prick was trying to get him to admit something. He couldn’t remember what. Whatever his response had been must have truly infuriated the little cunt for he poured even more of that horrid concoction down his throat. Gods it had burned, worse than the horse piss Drogo had tried to pass as alcohol once. Apparently one of his blood riders had been trying a new recipe for brewing and Jon got to be the first to try it. He so owed Drogo for that.

In any case his body had tried to revolt against the liquid, worse than the time he over drank and threw up. Yet for some reason he couldn’t seem to expel the elixir. His body didn’t seem to want to obey him.

If only he had fallen into unconsciousness, instead he was still vaguely aware, but nothing made sense. Everything was colors and loud noise and moving, moving, moving. He couldn’t even tell up from down.

Gods he was going to be sick.

He thought perhaps someone was holding him, but every inch of his skin felt on fire, so it was hard to tell. Strangely enough it wasn’t painful, just unnatural, like ants running all over him.

A strange harsh voice called out to him causing him to jerk. Where was he? Was he standing? Was he moving? Who called to him?

It came again, this time bringing a sense of COLD with it.

Jon knew this feeling. He had felt it before. Yet he couldn’t remember. Why couldn’t he remember? His head hurt so much, he couldn’t pull his thoughts straight.

Without warning everything seemed to stop. A quiet grew around him, near oppressive. Jon was grateful for the reprieve, until he opened his eyes.

He was back in the dark cold realm the Night King had attacked him from before. His legs seemed to sink into the snow, the icy depths closing in around his shins to trap him further. The cold sting of the wind slapped across his face, stinging his exposed skin harshly. Only the wind made no sound, causing every last one of his hairs to stand on end.

Dread turned his stomach, causing a far worse sensation to form.
The guttural language came again, closer now. Jon swiveled his head back and forth trying to find where his enemy was. Falling snow blinded him, keeping him weak against this threat. His heart hammered in his chest, the fear growing as he knew he was vulnerable.

The amulet Prince Doran’s court mystic had given him had been taken by the guards before Joffrey had him hauled out before the crowd. Whatever substance he forced him to drink had also opened him up and ruined what mental defenses he had. All of his training now lay useless thanks to that spoiled ass.

He tried to move, but his legs still refused to follow his mental commands. Not even his arms seemed able to raise or function in any manner he could use.

Seven Hells what had the boy king given him?

The snow started to swirl around him, moving faster and faster like a snow twister that occasionally happened in the North. Beautiful but deadly all the same. Jon could feel shards of ice scratching his skin, pulling forth blood with each pass. He wanted to shiver from the way the temperature seemed to drop even further, yet even that seemed beyond his ability at the moment.

A particularly strong gust had his forcing his eyes closed, lest he lose them to the onslaught of ice shards. When he opened them once more, he wished he hadn’t.

Grey eyes stared into shining blue. Not Tully blue or a sky blue, or even a light blue many of the southerners seemed to have. No this was a bright, unnatural glowing blue filled with malice and hate. Unlike the other Walker he had faced, this one had no hair, instead horn-like protrusions stuck out, like a perverse crown along his brow. His skin was the same bluish color, with strange ridges etched into it. He wore similar armor to the other creature and didn’t appear to carry any weapon. Though Jon supposed he would not need to since this creature commanded ice and snow.

It did not take a maester to realize this was the Night King. This was the being he was supposed to fight and hopefully defeat. Jon wondered how that would be possible, when he felt so insignificant next to this creature. This Other that felt older than time itself, eyes speaking of experiences and sights Jon had never even imagined to see. His power pushed against Jon’s very soul, daring the young northerner to fight back.

Jon wanted to, gods he wanted to. Still his body refused to obey!

One clawed hand reached out to him, the sharp claw like nails coming ever closer. The hand settled onto his shoulder, a mockery of many friendly touches Jon had experienced in the past. Cold started seeping even deeper into him, as if to turn him into ice itself. It burned as much as it froze.

No! He would not fall here! He would not give in! He had been fighting to stop this monster! He wouldn’t give in! He was ICE! The Blood of the Starks flowed through him! They were the North!

The painful sensation in his blood seemed to still. The Night King paused, eyes narrowed in anger. Jon looked right at him, his own eyes glaring back. That’s right! He carried the Ice of the Starks in his blood! Winter was their bread and butter! He would not be defeated by cold.

But he was also more than that.

Something sparked inside his stomach, a warmth he had not expected.

He was Targaryen. He was FIRE! It flowed through their blood like the dragons they rode. His fire could melt even the coldest of ice. He would not succumb to the darkness!
The Night King out right frowned, removing his hand from Jon’s shoulder. Instead he pulled it back to strike. Jon’s eyes widened in worry. He still could not move!

Just as the creature brought his hand down to strike a fatal blow, strong limb-like arms wrapped around his torso and yanked him bodily out of the way. He heard the enraged howl the Night King let loose as his prey escaped.

Jon felt as if his back hit a solid wall of ice, before it dissolved into pure clean water. Cold was replaced by unimaginable warmth. He was confused, his body turned around once more, unsure which way was up. His lungs ached with the desire to gulp in air. He thrashed violently trying to find a way to the surface.

His air was running low, his body shutting down again. Just as his vision darkened once more, something grabbed him again. Unable to resist he succumbed to unconsciousness.

Xxx

Someone was singing. It was a soft melody, calming. He hadn’t heard this song before. He liked it.

He was laying down on thick grass, his head laying on something soft. Fingers were running through his hair. It felt… really nice.

He was warm too. It reminded him of hugs from his siblings or the fresh cookies Old Nan used to bring him as a boy.

Off to the side he heard a giggle and the telltale sounds of a child running around. It reminded him of the times he watched Arya, Bran and Rickon as they played in the Gods Wood back home. Though the air was definitely warmer here.

“Wake up Jaehaerys,” a sweet voice coaxed gently.

“Must I,” he asked.

The woman above him chuckled, deep a sweet like the chocolate Oberyn made him try once. “Yes, dearest. I wish to speak to you. Show me those lovely grey eyes.”

Begrudgingly he blinked his eyes open, finding himself staring at the beautiful caramel skin and deep chocolate hair of who could only be Elia Targaryen ne Martell. “Mother Elia?” He jolted when he realized how he addressed her. “Uh… I mean your grace!”

The woman tutted and flicked his forehead. “You had it right the first time my little wolf-dragon. You are just as much my son as Lyanna’s. Just as my children are her children.”

“He flushed at the praise, feeling a warmth in his chest he had never truly experienced before. Is this what it is like to have a mother? Wait… if Mother Eila is here, then is… He looked around but did not see any other adults in the vicinity.

“They wanted to come sweetling,” Elia informed him knowingly. “Unfortunately they could not. Why the gods will not allow it now, I do not know, only that they have forbid it for the time being.” Jon slumped a bit in disappointment. “Know that both of them are very proud of you and love you
very much. Your father is especially proud that you took the high road, while your mother was hoping you’d at least sock Robb once.”

Jon let out a huffed laugh. Gods his mother really did sound like Arya. “I still might, haven’t seen him again have I?”

Elia chuckled, still running her fingers through his curls. “Well, in that case, make sure it’s a good shot.”

Jon laughed again. “You sound a lot like Prince Oberyn.”

“Who do you think taught him,” she shot back cheekily.

“Where are we,” he asked after a moment, glancing around but not knowing their location. There seemed to be several heart trees, but he’d never seen this many in one place.

“You are on the Isle of Faces,” she explained calmly. “After that lion bitches’ son poisoned you with that foul concoction, your knights and friends fled the city and headed north. However, nothing they did seemed to help. They were met by Lord Reed and he realized you needed the healing waters on the Isle to free you. So they brought you here. Just in time, for the Night King almost had you.”

Jon frowned as the memory came to him. He shuddered in remembrance of the cold and fear that had filled him during the encounter.

“I’m afraid you will carry a mark from that meeting.” Her fingers brushed against his shoulder, causing him to flinch slightly. It felt painful, like a deep bruise. He glanced to see his shoulder had a hand-shaped mark that was almost black, like frostbite. His neck had similar if less noticeable marks from the last dream he’d suffered with that creature.

“Gods, Art and Oz are going to mother hen me again,” Jon lamented.

Elia laughed happily. “Aye, and you deserve it, pup! You mean a lot to them, and many others so they are allowed to be upset when you are hurt. Though I do believe it is Egg you need to worry about the most. I am sure he is planning to lock you away in Dragonstone in a room full of pillows and blankets so you can never be hurt again!”

Jon groaned pitifully while she just laughed even more at his plight.

Suddenly something slammed into his abdomen causing him to sit up, grunting in pain. He found a small girl, with bright violet eyes and dark curls giggling happily from her perch.

“Jae Jae!” Her greeting was exuberant in the least.

His eyes softened immediately as he knew exactly who this was. “Rhaenys. It is good to see you sister,” he replied, hugging her close.

“Did you meet Balerion? Was he nice to you? I told him to be nice,” she announced joyfully in the way most children did.

“Aye, he was very kind. Kept me great company while I was in the Keep,” he assured her, kissing her temple. Gods, he’d never met her yet already he felt taken with his sister. “Have you been good for Mother Elia and the others? Have you had fun?”

“Yes! I have been very good! I play every day, with Mama, and Mother Lyanna and Papa, and gramma and Uncle Lu and Ser Gery and everyone!”
“I am glad,” he told her honestly.

“Will you play with me?” Her eyes were wide and earnest, and like every other time he dealt with children, he felt like a wet blanket.

“Aye, what game shall we play sister?”

Jon didn’t know how long he ran around and played with Rhaenys, sometimes Mother Elia joining them. All he knew was he felt peaceful for the first time in a long time. He didn’t have his normal everyday worries, instead he just played and laughed with two women who should have been with him growing up.

It didn’t seem all that long when he started hearing his name called, like someone was yelling from far, far away. Something in him told him it was people from the waking world and they were calling him back. He didn’t really want to go. He wanted to stay forever, yet he knew he couldn’t.

“I have to go,” he said sadly, hugging a sleepy Rhaenys close. Elia moved up beside him and brushed her fingers through his hair in a comforting manner.

“You do sweetling,” Elia confirmed quietly.

“I wish I didn’t have to go. I want to stay with you two,” he admitted shyly.

“Oh sweetling, we will all be together again one day,” she told him gently. Then flicked his nose. “But it had better not be for a VERY long time! You and Egg have to live your lives to the fullest! I want lots of grandchildren to look over!”

“Oh…” Jon blushed bright red not sure how to respond to that, causing Elia to let out a peel of laughter.

“Oh you are so adorable!”

* Jon! Jon… Jaehaerys!*

Jon turned to where the sound was coming from, it seemed to be the deep pool surrounded by the weir woods.

He looked back to Rhaenys who had fallen asleep in his arms. “It’s not fair…”

“It never is,” Elia told him softly as she took Rhaenys from him. “All you can do it make the best of what life throws at you and try to be happy as long as you can.”

*Jaehaerys open your damn eyes or I’ll shave all your hair off! You BRAT! *

Jon huffed a bit while Elia chuckled.

“You’d best get going before Oswell makes good on his threat.” She ran a hand along Jon’s cheek. “This is not goodbye forever, just for now. Know that we all love you and are proud of you.”

“Thank you,” Jon mumbled. “I… I love you all too.”

She kissed his cheek. “We know sweetling. We will be watching.”

Then she pushed Jon into the pool.

When he pushed up out of the water he found himself staring at Oswell and Barristan Selmy, Bronn
and Jory all leaning over him. A few people he had never seen before stood back around them.

“Thank the gods,” Jory breathed out in relief.

Oz just smacked Jon’s head, albeit lightly. “Damn brat! Making me worry like that! When you’re on your feet again I’m training you into the ground!”

“Missed you too.”
Chapter 75 Bran

Bran growled in frustration as he dropped out of another vision. He came to in the same gods wood he had met Jon in when he first decided to become the student of the Bloodraven. He knew it would be difficult, but this was beyond frustrating.

“What is the point of all of this,” he cried out angrily. “Every time we look into the past and we can’t DO anything! So many mistakes made, so many lives lost, and all because people just wouldn’t speak!”

“Aye,” Brynden Rivers agreed patiently. “It is quite frustrating how the truth is never truly seen until after the fact, and often no one admits it, because humans dislike admitting their mistakes.” He eyed his student thoughtfully. “Tell me young Bran, when you and one of your siblings get into a fight, how many sides of the story are there?”

The boy frowned in confusion. “Two. Mine and theirs,” he stated with assurance. “Father or mother always makes sure to ask both of us what happened.”

“Aye, that is a good way to get to the bottom of the matter, however you forget one thing,” the older man coached. “There are in fact THREE sides to every story. Yours, theirs and the TRUTH. You see, humans all have their own perception of the truth and facts to how an even occurs. Those perceptions are often skewed by personal bias or misrepresented facts. The truth however, is what WE search for. You and I get to see how events unfold with no bias, no misconceptions for we have ALL the information in the end.”

“But… don’t the history books already have it all written down,” Bran argued. “Why should we watch the past when it is recorded already.”

“And who writes those books,” Brynden countered. At Bran’s frown he continued. “The victors of those events. Often the written book is also biased. Even some of the ‘informational’ books in the Citadel are biased, even when they are simply writing technics or observational information. Humans are not perfect, and often the history books are written to make one side look better than the other. To the other side, the victors are the bad guys. For example, you believe your father to be a hero in the Rebellion?”

“Well… yes. He fought to avenge his father, brother and sister.”

“Aye, but to those loyal to Rhaegar he was the villain. He was committing treason against his sworn ruler,” Bryden explained patiently.

“But, father wouldn’t have if the Mad King hadn’t burned his father and killed his brother,” Bran fought back desperately, his young mind refusing to believe his father was in the wrong.

“I did not say he had no reason to rebel,” Brynden chided gently. “I am trying to show you that there are always opinions to the contrary. History as written by Baratheon has painted himself and your father as heroes. Had the Targaryens won, they would have been painted the villains. However, you and I know the truth. Both sides were right and wrong. You and I are the keepers of human history. We are the ones who know the truth and remember all of those men and women who survived through time. We do so, because the truth of the past can help with events of the future, as limited as our abilities to interfere is. Sometimes we can help guide those in need to the truths of the past, so they can keep from repeating the mistakes of that time.”
“Like with the Night King,” Bran opined. “We’re looking into his past to see if we can’t find a way to help Jon defeat him. Because those of the past could not.”

“Yes, that is part of it. There are also some secrets that must come to light in the present that have been lost to time,” Bryden continued. “For example, you saw the truth of Jon’s parentage.”

Bran flinched, curling in on himself and looking down trying to fight the tears in his eyes. A large hand patted his head gently.

“Knowing the truth does not make him any less your brother,” Brynden assured softly. “Jon may be your cousin in truth, but to him you are his little brother. Knowing the truth, do you see Jon any different?”

“No! He’s always been my brother,” Bran declared sharply.

“Then that is what he is,” the other affirmed. “Regardless, you are family and that is what matters. But imagine if your father died, or Arthur and Oswell never found Jon? He would never know his true origins. Something he needs to know if he is to fight with his total ability.”

Bran blanched at the thought. He had seen a part of history where a man’s true heritage was kept from him. He had fought against his own family without even knowing. Had he known the truth it would have saved so many lives. Bran thought of what would happen if Jon hadn’t known the truth, if he had come across those who were supposed enemies of the Starks, simply because of what ‘history’ had said. It left a chill in his bones.

“Exactly,” Bryden murmured, eying the child knowingly. “However, our purpose is also more. We are the memory of human kind. We embody the truth of their history on this world. To remember those who have passed on is to keep them alive. Many people forget those who have come before, so we remember for them.”

“Because someone needs to know the truth,” Bran reiterated quietly. “Still, sometimes it’s so hard. I just want to…”

“Knock their heads together,” Brynden finished for him with a wry grin. “Trust me child, I know the feeling. I have been doing this much longer than you have. Even worse is watching events of the present and being ignored by those who are supposed to believe in the power of the old ways.” He huffed irritably. “If I wasn’t so old I’d march down past the Wall and start knocking heads with my staff!”

Bran giggled imagining several of the northern lords going against the legendary Brynden Rivers and getting a staff to the head. The familiar warning his father often gave him and his brothers filtering through his mind. “You could ring them like a bell!”

“Indeed I could,” Brynden agreed with a hearty laugh. “Used to do so to my brothers a time or two! And despite what they might tell you, they deserved it!”

Their laughter tapered off and Bran sat deep in thought. “So… is that what the Night King wants? To destroy history and the truth?”

“The Night King wanted to rule the world,” Bryden corrected tiredly, eyes staring into the distance. “He was once a man like you and me. However, he wanted power above all else. He believed it was his due, though he did not earn it like others. So he became as he is now to show those who refused him his ‘right’ to rule. You will find young Bran there are some men who crave power over all else and are willing to go to the ends of the earth to get it.”
“But… if he kills everyone how would he be the ruler,” Bran frowned.

“I think after all these years he no longer cares so much about ruling as destroying all in his path,” the man admitted. “He has had millennia to let his anger fester and rot. He does not admit his current condition is of his own making, instead he places blame on others and wishes to exact revenge on the living for his own mistakes. He would rather rule a world of corpses than allow the living to continue.”

“How can anyone beat such anger and hate,” Bran whispered fearfully. “He’s so powerful. I saw what he did back then, how he beat back the First Men. If it wasn’t for the gods gift to Bran the Builder and the First Hero…”

“Like us, the gods can only interfere so much,” Brynden explained. “They created man with free will and allowed them to take over this world for a reason. While the gods have power, there are also rules. To interfere completely would be to take away our free will and control us once more. Instead they have given us the tools to fight back on our own. Certain families, like the Starks and Targaryens carry magic in their blood. It had faded over time but it is still there, growing stronger. Jon carries both, making the magic in his blood equal to the magic of the Night King. He simply needs to learn how to wield it properly.” The old man smiled gently at the boy. “He also has something the Night King never had.”

“What?”

“The desire to protect. To protect the innocent, the weak. To protect his friends and comrades and most importantly, to protect his family.”
Arya gasped as she jolted up from her bed. She’d only been asleep maybe an hour or so, however lately she’d been slipping into dreams with Nymeria more. When she’d first had dreams of running and hunting she’d been a little scared, especially when she could taste the blood on her tongue the next morning. She hadn’t wanted to say anything at first because she thought it would prove how much she didn’t belong with her family. Then Bran had brought up his own dreams one morning and the flood gates opened as all of them had had some sort of dream from a wolf’s perspective, or should she say Direwolves.

Her father had then explain warging to them and how it was indeed not a legend and he had it on good authority that the Stark bloodline had many wargs in their history. It had been a very big relief for her to hear that. She had even tried to do warg when she was not sleeping but as of yet she had not been successful, none of them had. Her father said it would take time and practice, however he preferred them not knowing just yet as it limited the mischief they could get into. Spoilsport.

Tonight though it had proven a very useful ability.

“Arya? Are you okay?”

She turned to where her sister Sansa was a bed next to her. It had been decided the girls would all share a room with Shireen, the younger girl still asleep next to Jeyne in the other bed.

“I need to speak to father,” she whispered excitedly.


“Because I know where Jon is,” she announced happily, already scrambling out of bed. She heard Sansa following behind her, demanding she wait but Arya was far too excited to do so.

She bolted out the door, knowing she had scared the guards given the yelps of surprise. Still, she didn’t stop to see, too focused on her destination. Seeing no guard at the door to the room her father had taken she knew he would be in the main counsel room with the other men planning their next move. She could vaguely hear Sansa and one of the guards following them, trying to get her to stop, but she wouldn’t.

The guards at the door she need to go through tried to stop her but a quick duck and weave (thank you master Syrio) had her bypassing them easily. She threw the door open as hard as she could since they were rather heavy. The noise started the group inside, not that she cared.

“FATHER!”

“FATHER!” he yelled in shock. “How many times have I told you not to…”

“Never mind that! I know where Jon is,” she cut him off, not wanting to be sent away before she could tell him the good news.

The men and women in the room immediately gave her their attention. She could see Ser Arthur, Prince Aegon and his advisor the stupid Jon Connington. She didn’t like him. Prince Oberyn and Cousin Brynden were there as was Lady Ashura and Ser Duck. Which was a silly name to have, ducks are not really very fearsome at all. She could also see Obara and a few other Crownland lords whose names she had already forgotten.
“Lady Arya, I am sure it was just a dream,” Lady Ashura tried to assure her but she snorted.

“No it wasn’t,” she cut the lady off somewhat rudely. “I am a Stark and WE are wargs.” Turning to her father she grinned brightly. “I was dreaming through Nymeria’s eyes again and we were on this strange island with SO many weirwood trees! More than I’ve ever seen and many of them were Heart Trees!”

“The Isle of Faces,” Ser Arthur murmured, quieting when she sent him an impatient look. Prince Oberyn, Obara and Cousin Brynden seemed very amused, though she didn’t know why. Honestly, these people are supposed to know to let one finish their story.

“Anyway,” she emphasized, glaring a bit at the repentant knight. “She was coming back from a hunt and she made it to a small camp. I saw Jory and some other knights and even the Hound! Jon was lying next to the fire with Ghost. He didn’t look very good, he’s really pale,” she told him worriedly. “But then, this man knelt in front of Nymeria and he spoke to me! He said ‘Little wolf, don’t worry for your brother, he is well, just resting. Tell your father and the Dawn Star that the Frog has their youngest prince and he is safe,’ except then one of the free folk, that really tall red headed one you talk about came up and started laughing saying Jon may be safe from the stupid kneelers but he might be in danger of being stolen,” she explained in a rush. Then she paused with a frown. “They’re not really going to steal him are they? I mean it wouldn’t be fair if Jon can’t fight back…”

Her father snorted. “No Arya, I’m pretty sure Tormund was joking. Besides, Jon’s guard would never allow such,” her father assured happily, looking far less stressed than he had been. “Thank you for relaying Howland’s message, it is much needed.”

“Howland? Howland Reed,” Sansa asked, coming up beside Arya, a huge smile on her face.

“Aye, he’s the Lord of Greywater Watch,” father explained. “He has been a very good and loyal friend for years. If he is with Jon then all is well.”

“Why did he call himself frog?”

“Because that’s what they eat,” Prince Oberyn informed her happily, grinning at the disgusted looks both girls gave him. “Don’t knock it. Frog meat can be very tasty depending on how it is cooked.

“Question,” Aegon interrupted, looking quite curious. “What is warging and more importantly, what do you mean by ‘steal Jae’?”

Cousin Brynden chuckled. “Well, warging, or skin changing is an ability the first men have. It is mostly thought to be a myth; however it is quite real. A person with this ability can essentially see through the eyes of an animal, usually a bonded animal, like the Direwolves are with the Stark children. The Starks especially have had a history of being able to warg with animals, so it is not unusual they can see through the eyes of their Direwolves. With practice and age they will be able to do so at will.”

“That is terrifying and strangely intriguing,” the man with the long silver hair that looked a lot like Aegon stated. “I can imagine it is very useful for spying as well.”

“Aye,” father admitted. “There are not many who can do it, mostly members of the Free Folk. We have those people manning the Wall and keeping eyes north for the enemy.”

“We have a few in our company that have the gift,” Cousin Brynden told them. “And yes, it is VERY useful.”

“Can Jae do it,” Aegon asked excitedly. “Can he warg with his dragon?”
“I honestly do not know your grace,” father stated thoughtfully. “I am sure he has the ability, however, with all that has been going on I am unsure if he has had time to discover it.”

“And this stealing business,” Lady Ashura reminded them, looking a bit more amused by the idea.

“It’s how the Free Folk marry,” Arya told them, pleased to know something they didn’t. “They choose a spouse and then they have to steal them, but the one being stolen gets to fight back, and if they don’t want to be their spouse they make sure they can’t be stolen. I saw it happen before we came south. One of the Free Folk tried to steal a spear wife but she wasn’t having it. She stuck her spear through his leg, it was really impressive.”

The men and women around them looked shocked, except for her father and Cousin Brynden, the latter was laughing while the former was sighing in exasperation. Why she didn’t know, she was just telling them the truth.

“There are rules though,” Sansa piped up, trying to defend the Free Folk. It was actually sweet of her sister. She didn’t like their ways, but she still respected them. “Truly both in the couple must agree to the stealing for it to be valid, and neither member can be truly vulnerable before the stealing commences. So they wouldn’t try with Jon now, as he is still recovering from his ordeal. No one would be able to steal Jon if he didn’t truly want it.”

“That… is actually kind of logical,” Obara stated, looking far too thoughtful. “It would give the one being stolen the proof their spouse was a good fighter… Prove their worth… Also prove the one being stolen won’t put up with any crap…”

“No, you will not be employing any of these tactics,” Prince Oberyn informed his daughter tartly. “At least not until we can discuss it as a family and any man coming for your hand still has to ask me first, because I want the chance to threaten them!”

Several snorts echoed through the room.

“In any case, this is good news. Now we know Jon and the others are out of Kings Landing and safe from the Lannisters, for now,” Ser Arthur reminded them, looking far more relaxed than he had in days.

“Aye, the Lannisters have lost their advantage against us,” Aegon grinned.

“We still need to be cautious,” father warned him. “Tywin is not one you should underestimate. He will no doubt find some other way to gain the upper hand. Right now we need to solidify your alliances so he will not have more resources to utilize.”

“He’s right,” Connington agreed, though it looked like it pained him to do so. “We need to make sure the other house are on our side to fight against the Lannisters. We must also be vigilant against assassins. Tywin has no problem utilizing them, especially now that his biggest monster is dead.”

“Yes, yes he is,” Oberyn grinned viciously. “Remind me to tell Doran we will need to hold a grand celebration in Dorne to honor Jon for his deed in ridding the world of the Mountain. I only wish I had been there to see it.”

Sansa gasped and even Arya stared in shock. The Mountain was huge from what she remembered. He must have been at least twice Jon’s size!

“Jon took down the Mountain,” Sansa asked their father in shock. “Was he hurt doing so? That man was a beast!”
“Aye, but he did come out fairly well from that battle according to our allies in the Keep,” father promised. “It was his stay with Joffrey that did the most damage. But do not fret, Jon is very strong, he will heal.”

“I’ll kill the brat for hurting him,” Arya growled, much like her wolf.

“I’m afraid you will need to get in line for that one little wolf,” Aegon informed her wryly, his eyes promising pain to the blond prat. “I want to personally show him what I do to those who harm my kin.”

“As long as he suffers,” she sniffed.

“Right,” father sighed. “Back to bed for both of you. You’ve given us the message, but it’s time for my pups to sleep.”

Arya was going to protest but Sansa grabbed her hand and pulled her into the hall after a short good night to the others, their guard following.

“But I wanted to stay,” she whined to her sister.

“They need to plan their next move. Now that Jon is safe they can make our enemies regret ever going against our families,” Sansa told her primly, a hard glint in her eyes. “After all, you attack one member of the pack…”

“You attack them all,” she finished, the two sharing a rather dark smirk.

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