Her Life and Her Death

by magicmoon111

Summary

Swayed by the powerful words of a dying queen, Stannis Baratheon takes in baby Daenerys Targaryen as his ward. In the North, Eddard Stark is ordered to raise Jon Snow to wed and dishonor the Targaryen princess, by bringing bastard blood into her line, and ending the Dragons forever.

Across the continent, and across the Narrow Sea, the wheel continues to turn, and the Great Game commences. Thus begins a series of events that would change the fate of Westeros forever.

Familial relationship between gruff Stannis and his ward. Eventual Jon x Dany.
Notes

See the end of the work for notes

- Inspired by The Court of Bastards by MariDark
The former Queen’s eyes, when they lifted from the child suckling at her breast, contained all the dying fire of the Targaryen dynasty. “Her first and last meal, the only thing I can now give her,” she whispered.

In her youth, the Queen’s gaze had been an inferno; any who’d foolishly impeded her will could attest to that. Years of abuse at her husband’s hand had smothered it into a small flame, but dragons were stubborn creatures, and Rhaella Targaryen had held onto that fire despite what the gods had thrown at her. She had not let the cruelty of life break her; she had reveled in small joys, in the love of her children, the laughter of her grandchild. In the hope for a better future. Or so the rumours, which Stannis generally ignored, had claimed.

Yet now, with Robert crowned King, her family all but dead, her house defeated, and her own life draining away, only embers remained in her gaze. Her arms tensed around the babe, gathering it closer to her breast as if she wished she could take it back into the safety of her body. The three handmaidens surrounding her stirred, their loyalty honed by years of service.

Stannis Baratheon was not a man to pity others; he believed in justice for one’s wrongdoings, and rewards for good work. Yet he could feel the stirring sympathy as he gazed at this proud dragon’s last stand. He felt no ill will towards the Targaryen; in fact, breaking his vow to the crown and supporting his brother’s rebellion had been difficult for Stannis. Yet he had made his choice, and now his duty compelled him to see it through to the end.

“My Lady,” he nodded, voice curt. Her gaze returned to the child, a forlorn smile at the title; a mockery of what she’d once been.

“I named her Daenerys,” the queen murmured. Her voice was a raw, reedy thing, but there was tenderness in her gaze. “Daenerys Stormborn. A mother’s foolish fancy, that she may grow to follow in her ancestor’s steps—and find happiness.” The queen’s laugh was hollow.

“Are you here to kill her, Stannis Baratheon? A small babe, not even a day old?” She shook her head, and then finally raised her gaze to his, blazing hatred. “Like your Usurper brother, who sanctioned—who rewarded—the murder of my grandchildren!”

Stannis pressed his thin lips tightly together, teeth clenching. Yes, his brother had done as she said. He had seen the corpses of the Targaryen babes, still wrapped in that dishonorable manner, marking the ground before the Iron Throne. No matter how many times that spot was cleaned, the tainted would never abate. While it was a strategically sound move to eliminate any threats to his reign,
Robert’s actions were wrong. Stannis felt the shame staining him; unlike his brother, he would not deny the evil of that act.

“That should not have occurred,” Stannis acknowledged, voice cold. But beneath was an entreaty. I had no part in that, his soul whispered, I tried to make it right. “On behalf of House Baratheon, I—”

“Enough. I cannot absolve you, nor would I. The gods will be your judges. You and your brother and all the dogs that follow him. Words don’t matter, Stannis; only actions. If you want forgiveness, earn it.” The passionate words seemed to steal what little of her energy remained, as she slumped back father into her pillows, hands shaking with the effort to hold the child. One of the handmaidens stepped forwarded, arms outstretched, but was waved away. Despite the dark sheets, Stannis could see the first inklings of just how doomed the former queen was. A stain was spreading on the thick fabric covering her middle. Her face was shinning with sweat, and flushed with fever. The smell of blood permeated the air.

Stannis did not believe in the gods; and even if they were real, he doubted they paid any attention to the foolish games of man. But he did believe that actions spoke, that words were wind. At that moment, he couldn’t deny a growing respect for the dying queen. Blood of dragons indeed.

“Approach me, Stag.” The words were an order, but underneath the bravado, Stannis heard the first signs of desperation. He silently did as bid, coming to stand at her bedside. Arms shaking terribly, she lifted the child towards him. Stannis gazed down, nonplused at the tiny creature being presented to him.

“Your Grace!” one handmaiden protested, lurching forward as if to snatch the child away. As if Stannis was going to draw his sword and run the babe through.

“Silence!” Rhaella ordered, voice sharp as steel. The woman fell back, cowed. Violet eyes turned to Stannis, and he found his earlier assertions incorrect. The queen’s body may be dying, but the dragon fire in her eyes was alive and well. “Take her.”

His hand twitched up automatically at her tone—the voice of a mother...a queen. But he hesitated before taking the child. He had no experience with infants, he had none of his own, and had never had cause to handle one. Suddenly he became aware of the grime on his gloves and clothes, which was a preposterous concern when the child’s wrap was already stained red. “Take her,” the queen said again, weaker this time.

Finally, slowly, he reached out at took the bundle, holding her awkwardly with stiff arms. The babe fussed and twitched, to his faint dismay.

What is happening?

Stannis looked back at the queen, feeling a faint sense of dissociation. Just moments ago, he was seizing this castle, assured of his actions and confident in his decisions. Yet now he held a child—a child his brother would surly order dead—and he felt more discomfited than he had in his entire life.

It was the faint amusement that he witnessed on her face that finally Stannis snapped out of his stupor. “What is this? Why have you just...surrendered her? I must take her to the King. And I will obey whatever orders he then gives. So why...?”

She sighed, and her voice was weaker when she answered. “Because I have no other choice. She came too late,” Rhaella murmured, and there was a dry irony in her words, “and I could not send her with Viserys.”

So the prince is gone.
Her sigh was long, tired. “I have heard of you, Stannis Baratheon, child-slayer’s kin.” He stiffened, and the babe fussed again until he yielded his tension. “Your brother’s reputation has traveled far, and I hear you are his exact opposite.” Stannis felt the slight like a slap to the face, reminded of a childhood being overshadowed by his brother. He ground his teeth together.

His ire rose, until she said, “And I thank the gods that you were the one sent to me.”

What?

“You, and not a Lion’s pet. You, and not the Usurper himself.”

“My brother is not a Usurper,” he snapped. He sensed the makings of some plot, as if invisible strings were quietly surrounding him but he could find no way to stop them. “He is the rightful King by right of justice!”

“He is a man whose reign began on the blood of children,” Rhaella said dismissively. “Mark my words, he will never find comfort in that seat.”

Stannis clenched his jaw, mouth opening, but she cut him off. “Do you believe men should pay for the sins of their kin?”

He hesitated, but answered truthfully. “No. A man should only pay for the sin he himself has committed.”

Rhaella exhaled, eyes closing briefly, then met his gaze soberly. As she spoke, her voice grew stronger and stronger. “Her name is Daenerys. Daenerys of House Targaryen. Daenerys Stormborn. Do not forget her name. She is a living, breathing creature, an innocent baby girl, who should not have to suffer for being born daughter to a cruel man and weak woman. And she is now your duty.”

Stannis flinched back, stoic face betraying his shock. “What–”

“Her life, and her death. She is now your responsibility, Stannis of House Baratheon. You have taken this island, and everything on it, and that comes with a price. You will protect it! I, Rhaella of House Targaryen, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, order you to take care of my child. Prove you words. This is my last order in this life. And you will obey.”

Stannis couldn’t move, could barely breath. He had been raised by powerful men, surrounded by commanders and soldiers, had gown up on the battlefield, and faced terror, horror, and starvation during the rebellion. Despite all that, despite the fact the he knew she was no longer queen, Stannis felt the order wrap itself around his limb, felt the weight of a duty that was never supposed to be his drape itself on his shoulders. Suddenly the bundle in his arms felt infinitely heavier.

“You will accompany him,” she ordered the handmaiden who had tried to take the baby earlier. The girl immediately nodded, as helpless to resist as Stannis felt. He suddenly realized that this dying woman was perhaps the strongest person he’d ever met, and that respect tightened his chains.

What am I doing!?

“Wait!” he finally protested, shaking his head to clear his ridiculous thoughts, and swallowing the lump in his throat. “Are you mad?! I cannot—will not—disobey my king!”

She only stared at him, silent, as his heart pounded in his ears. Stannis has never felt so—so...emotional. He was the calm brother, the stoic one, so enduring in the face of a storm, so uncompromising in his convictions, that many doubted he could even feel! The queen sighed again, and this time, when she closed her eyes, she didn’t reopen them. Her arms fell to her side, listless,
and Stannis panicked. She couldn’t die and leave this burden upon his head!

“Her life and her death, child-slayer’s kin,” the queen said, her voice only a whisper now, sighing once more. “You want…forgiveness? Earn…it.”

This time, when the queen exhaled, no inhale followed. Stannis stood there for many moments, staring at her unmoving face. She looked much too peaceful for a woman who had caused such upheaval in Stannis’s life. Around him, the three women sobbed.

He looked down at the baby, who began to fuss again, and then around at the room. You have no duty to her, some part of him whispered. Just the ravings of a madwoman. Another mad Targaryen. Give the child to Robert and be done with it.

He thrust the babe at the handmaiden tasked to follow him. She flinched but quickly took the child, holding it protectively to her breast. Stannis breathed deeply, and slowly his mask of rock fell back upon his face. What had he done, shamming himself before strangers?

“You name, girl,” he demanded curtly. She flinched again, much to his annoyance, and shakily said “Myra, my Lord.”

“Clean the child, and get ready. We depart in the morning. The rest of you, report to the castellan for new duties and assignments. Tell him to honor the Targaryen funeral tradition and burn the former queen.”

He turned and strode to the door, piecing together his calm, regaining his confidence. Words of a madwoman.

“My Lord, please!” Myra gasped, and Stannis turned, impatience stamped on his harsh face, blue eyes cold. She swallowed thickly, clutching the child closer.

“What?”

The girl licked her lips, bloody hands trembling as she drew the child even closer. The babe began to squirm. “Where are we going?” she whispered.

Outside, the rumbling of an emerging storm began to twist. The baby began to cry, perhaps reminded of her birth, or perhaps finally sick of all the tension in the air. Daenerys Stormborn. Stannis ground his teeth together.

Madwoman.

Earn it.

Her life…

And her death.

“We sail for King’s Landing.”

Chapter End Notes

Mix of Book and Show.
There will never be anything romantic between Dany and Stannis.
Wolf's Honor

Chapter Summary

Ned reaches King’s landing after the events at the Tower of Joy. He contemplates his choices, his responsibilities, and his regrets. Robert Baratheon greets him upon the Iron throne, and Ned must compromise his honor in front of the court.

*This part wasn't supposed to be this long; Stannis was going to arrive with baby Dany by the end, but Young-Ned is such a mysterious character that trying to get into his mind right after the events of the rebellion was too interesting to skip. Hope you enjoy.

Astride their tired horses, Eddard Stark and his company—himself, three loyal swords, Howland Reed, and a young wet-nurse with a baby in her arms—stared ahead at the large city, with its massive, blood-red castle. His every muscle was weary, and the closer they got to the accursed city, the more his fatigue increased.

Gods, I want to go home.

Ned hated King’s Landing. He hated the smells—shit, fish, and rotting meat—the noise—drunks, whores, and the crying of orphans—and especially the emotions the cursed city evoked—rage, disappointment, bitter regret. Here, his father had burned. Here, his brother had strangled himself, desperate to stop the entertainments of a Mad King.

All the while the court watched, and did nothing. All the while an evil king laughed.

But now that king was dead. And the rage of those old torments had slowly yielded to grief, to a futile wish to close his eyes and awaken as a young boy again, his family whole around him. A young boy who would know what would happen; who could stop it. But that was a pointless wish, and Ned Stark had fresh torments upon his struggling shoulders, fresh regrets.

Promise me, Ned.

A new king sat on the throne, a king Ned himself had fought for. His friend, his brother by choice. Robert Baratheon, who had befriended young, shy, awkward Ned Stark—newly fostered ward of the Eyrie—and helped him overcome his melancholy homesickness. They’d spent eight years together, talked of their homes, laughter at jests, learned side by side. When they’d begun this rebellion, Ned had been a green boy who did not look deep enough into the heart of matters, a green boy determined to avenge his family and rescue his sister.

Promise me.

He was a boy no longer, and his mistakes trailed behind him like a bloody cloak. Robert was his friend. Robert was his brother. But Robert had changed.

A king who rewarded the murder of children. A king who refused to punish the Lannisters. A king who chose politics and power over honor and justice.

Robert had changed. Or perhaps Ned had never really known him, never really looked beneath the surface.
A man Lyanna ran from. A king she died in terror of…

Promise me, Ned.

Behind him, his nephew—son! He is my son, Jon Snow—began to fuss, awoken from his sleep as if Ned’s thoughts had intruded upon his dreams. Ned glanced over his shoulder at Danae, a Dronish wet-nurse, who immediately began to rock the child. The boy’s hair was black, and his eyes the cold steel of Ned’s own. Only stark blood showed in his features, and Ned thanked the Old gods for small mercies. He had to get the boy North; the south had long since cut down all their heart trees.

“Please, My Lord,” Danae implored. “I beg you to rest a few moments. Your son needs to be washed and fed.”

Ned nodded, relieved to have an excuse to prologue the inevitable torment of the city, and ordered the men to make camp. It was nearly noon anyway, and a short meal would do them well. They’d been traveling north for months now, the pace slow as Ned tried to come to terms with all he knew and everything he’d lost. The wet-nurse took Jon with her into the forest to be fed and cleaned. Ned motioned one of the Northmen after her to ensure she was protected.

Howland came to sit beside him, away from the other men. “What are you going to tell them?”

Ned didn’t pretend to misunderstand. They’d avoided this discussion for too long. “A bastard son, with a woman I was enamored with during the war. Robert won’t question it. Jon has my features and my blood; few will doubt his origins”

“And the mother?”

“Gone,” he said, word hard and final. Howland didn’t respond. He was the only living soul who knew the truth, but Ned didn’t doubt the man’s loyalty. If not towards Ned himself, then to Lyanna. Howland had loved Lyanna as if she were his sister; he would never betray her.

“Some may think he’s the Lady Dayne’s. It may not be a bad thing to foster those rumors,” Howland said softly. Ned scowled fiercely at smaller man, pain striking his chest. He saw a pair of violet eyes condemning him, a beautiful face twisted in anguish as he presented a sword to her. Her family, her friends, her loved ones all gone. She could stand it no longer.

“No. I will not dishonor her memory in such a way,” Ned hissed. “I caused her too much pain in life to continue to plague her soul after death.”

Ned remembered a tourney, years ago, and the feeling of his heart about to burst from his breast as he danced with the most beautiful maiden he’d ever seen. Before duty and a title had fallen on his head, before he’d wed his brother’s betrothed to further an alliance, before he’d known all this suffering, Ned-the-boy had envisioned a very different life for himself. Those dreams, and the woman in them, were gone now.

This is my fault. I should have seen it then. Everything started there!

Or perhaps it had started when Ned had carried Robert’s proposal home with him, when their father had declared Lyanna’s marriage to his friend. He remembered the way her smile had died, the look in her eyes. Betrayal, he now knew, but hadn’t seen then.

A caged wolf. We tired to cage my wild, free sister.

Conversation done, Ned ate the rest of his meal in silence. Howland remained pensive beside him, the circles under his eyes ever darkening. Soon, they once more saddled the horses and continued,
the red-castle growing ever larger, its shadow ever closer.

“What do you think of him, Ned? Tell me truly,” she’d asked, eyes on the red-clad knight with dragons on his plate.

Young, green Ned Stark hadn’t thought anything of it, hadn’t paid attention to how his sister watched the prince. To how he’d watched her in return.

“Prince Rhaegar? A good man, by all account. They say the people love him,” he’d responded, watching the crown prince unseat yet another opponent. The crown had cheered, and young Ned’s awe matched theirs. Though you wouldn’t know it, looking at his grim face.

“I understand why,” she’d murmured, smile soft.

Aye, if Ned had only paid more attention at that time, perhaps all this heartache could’ve been avoided.

Jon, in a rare show of discontent, began to fuss.

The boy’s small whimpers steeled his resolve. He would not fail her again.

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Around them, the trappings of the Targaryens were gone, the skulls vanished and perhaps destroyed. The final proof of a dynasty’s end. Upon the Iron Throne, the newly crowned king shifted in discomfort. He was dressed lavishly in the southern style, tunic decorated with golden stags. Ned, in his dusty northern armor, felt like an alien. At Robert’s side was Jon Arryn, his Hand, and the man who was a second father to them both. The colorful court—many of the same highborn men and women who’d stood silent while his family burned—watched the proceedings with power-hungry plots whirling in their minds. Robert had refused a private meeting, insisting Ned’s party be brought to the throne room at soon as they’d entered the Red Keep.

The hope on Robert’s face was painful to view. No matter their falling out, this man was his friend, and Ned took no pleasure in his suffering. The king—tall, dark, broad of shoulder—swept his chill-blue eyes over their small, bedraggled party. His eyes lit when he saw Danae, only to dull upon the realization that she was not the woman he sought. His eyes widened when the saw the sleeping babe, and rage clouded his eyes.

“My bastard son,” Ned said swiftly, knowing what Robert assumed; and how right he actually was. The court gasped and murmured behind him, making Ned’s hands twitch in irritation. He could feel the shame crawling up his neck.

Robert’s eyes swung to him in surprise, momentarily distracted. “Your son! The honorable Ned Stark begat a bastard while his wife awaits him? I didn’t know you had it in you!” Ned’s ground his teeth at the grinning approval in his friend voice. Siring a bastard was a dishonorable act, and acknowledging one would stain him, his wife, and his house for many years. Not to mention all the hardship he was forcing upon the poor boy. It was not a matter that should be met with amusement.

“He is a good man, Lyanna. A great friend and a powerful warrior. He loves you, and will treat you well,” Ned-the-boy had insisted, tired of his sister’s constant criticisms of Robert.
She’d stared at him, and said quietly, “He doesn’t love me, Ned. Not really. Just a girl with a pretty face, just an idea. I know the difference.”

“Infatuation, then. You will get to know one another, and deeper love will come. And besides, familial love is different from that between a man and his wife,” he’d assured her—so blind, so arrogant.

Lyanna had looked away, be he hadn’t paid enough attention to the nuances of her expression to note the guilt. “I hear he has a bastard,” she’d retaliated, defensive. “One he doesn’t even acknowledge. He won’t honor his own child; he certainty won’t honor me. Not like father; not like you.”

“Enough, Lyanna! He is a man with flaws, like everyone. You must try to be more accepting. You have a duty to your house, to your family! Besides, once you are wed, Robert will stop his more… unsavory activities. You’ll see.” Ned ignored the twinge of doubt; he knew Robert—he wouldn’t dishonor his wife, his best-friend’s sister.

Her gaze iced over, the now-familiar coldness emerging. Ned softened, “Lyanna, I—”

“I see already, Ned. I see him…Do you?”

“Where is she, Ned?” Roberts voice broke into the memory, the amusement gone. “No matter what she—what she has gone through, Lyanna will always be a lady in my eyes and in the eyes of my court. I will take her as my wife; make her my queen. So…so bring her to me, Ned.” He sounded desperate, denying the terrible reality. Ned regarded his friend, and saw again his raw hope. Ned banished his traitorous thoughts in disgust. Robert loved Lyanna, just as Ned did. Had. He would have done right by her.

Face revealing his grief, Ned shook his head, once. Robert swallowed, and he suddenly looked smaller, drained of his signature vitality. For many moments, the court was totally silent. Robert’s heartbreak was plain for all to see.

“Did that…that dragonswan kill her? Did Rhaegar murder her, Ned?” The familiar fury began to fill Robert’s blue eyes, face flushing red. “I shouldn’t have killed him! I should have taken him prisoner and tortured him! That monstrous son of a whore!”

Ned turned away as the king continued to rage, voice louder and insults increasingly vulgar. The echoing room was deafened by his fury.

Finally, Jon Arryn stepped forward, placing a hand upon Robert’s shoulder. Like a doll cut from it’s strings, the king slumped forward, shaking. Ned’s heart broke all over again.

“The king is tired,” the Hand said firmly. “We shall adjourn court until the morrow. He will not be accepting visitors. My Lords, my Ladies, I apologize, but we must cancel today’s feast. Good day.”

The court snaked out, whispering amongst themselves, sneaking interested glances at the king. Ned noted that few showed any sympathy. This was a poisonous place, and Ned did not envy his friend. Robert retreated to a room behind the throne, Jon Arryn at his side. He turned to his companions, and saw baby Jon had awoken and began to fuss, no doubt frightened by Robert’s rage. He ordered one of the servants that remained to find suitable rooms for his companions, and requested the child and his nurse be placed within his own chambers. He didn’t trust the guards in this place, and ordered one of his men to stand outside the door.

Promise me, Ned.
Finally, with a deep breath, he steeled himself to follow his friend, his brother by choice—and to lie to his face.
Stag’s Decree

Chapter Summary

Stannis arrives at King's Landing, Ned fosters doubts about the king, and a proclamation is made. The wheel keeps turning.

Chapter Notes

The Iron Throne and Throne Room featured in this chapter is the one shown in this link: https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/gameofthrones/images/e/e5/Marc_Simonetti_Bran_theironthroneJoff.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20140926192518

I didn't like how either looked in the show. So, this is me being choosy.

“A bastard. You, Eddard Stark, fostering a bastard,” Robert shook his head, gazing down at the courtyard, where Danae sat with Jon upon a blanket, letting the summer sun warm her young charge. The boy was just shy of nine months now, and had begun to crawl. His first month of life had been difficult, and Ned had to stay in Dorne for longer than he’d anticipated, ever vigilant. Death in infancy was common, and he’d been terrified, every time he awoke, that the boy hadn’t made it through the night. The journey south to Starfall, and then north to King’s Landing, had been slowed both by Ned’s grief and his worry over the infant boy.

Luckily, the critical period had passed now, and the child was strong. He was a solemn, even tempered boy, and Ned knew that had to be his father’s blood, because Lyanna had never been quiet a day in her life. Unlike his mother as a child, Jon was a cautious lad. Ned watched as he slowly crawled away from Danae, constantly observing his surroundings, as if expecting an obstacle to suddenly appear. Every so often, he would glance at Danae as if to ensure she was still present, before continuing his exploration. The young woman’s encouraging coos could be heard from their place on the balcony.

“It wasn’t something I planned,” Ned said shortly.


“No,” Ned shook his head, looking back down at the courtyard, stomach turning. “Nevermind, Robert. It was just a jest.”

The words felt hollow, and the king remained silent. Ned could feel his contrition, adding to Ned’s growing fatigue.

*Gods, I want to go home.*
Ned was growing restless, wanting nothing more than to leave this place. He needed to get home, he needed to put his castle to rights and evaluate the damage the Rebellion had wrought amongst his people. Most of all, he needed to put Lyanna to rest.

Furthermore, he was ignoring pressing responsibilities. His wife and newborn son awaited him in Riverrun, and he was anxious to meet the boy he had named after Robert. While he dreaded seeing Catelyn again, knowing that no woman wanted to be faced with her husband’s betrayal, he was sure she would eventually accept and raise Jon as her own. She was a good person, and they didn’t have a passionate love between them that could truly incite her ire; Ned knew Lyanna’s son would be raised well—raised amongst family.

*Protected. Like I should have protected his mother.*

Robert had accepted Ned’s story at once, mostly too preoccupied with his grief—and his wine—to question further. Over the past week, the friends had grown closer, and the tattered rift that the Sack had created was slowly mending. Shared grief was a powerful unifier. But as he and Robert grew closer, Ned’s guilt grew greater. Robert placed absolute trust in Ned’s story—trust he didn’t deserve. At times, he was driven to confess, a million good memories with Robert urging him to confide in his friend. Once he almost had.

It was his promise, and flashes of infants wrapped in bloody banners, that halted his tongue.

*I would trust him with my life.*

*But I can’t trust him with Jon’s.*

Despite Ned’s proclamations that he must leave, that he’d been away from his home for far too long, Robert insisted that he stay until the end of the week. ‘One final feast’, he’d said, ‘to celebrate our victor and mourn our losses’. Ned had no use for feasts, and had grown sick of them in the fortnight since his arrival, but his guilt, and the knowledge that it would probably be years before he saw his friend again, forced him to comply.

“Your Grace!” They turned to see a servant hurriedly approached. The skinny man bowed quickly. “A raven, your Grace, from Dragonstone! Lord Stannis has taken the island!”

Robert surged forward. “Where is my Hand! Bring him to the small council chambers! At once, damn you!”

“He’s already there, your grace! He sent me to get you.”

Robert strode forward, back straight and seeming larger than he had since that disasters first meeting in the throne room. Robert seemed to have little patience for ruling, but he reveled in war. The king glanced over his shoulder at Ned. “What are you waiting for, a bloody written invitation? Come on!”

Ned shook his head, “I’m not a part of—”

“Seven hells, Ned! You’re my brother, and this rebellion was as much for your family, *more* even, than for me! Now hurry up, it seems my dour brother has finally made himself useful in this war!”

_Stanis Baratheon—face gaunt, eyes ringed with pitch black bags, and meticulous armour hanging off his withered frame—met them at the gate of Storm’s End. The man looked at if he’d aged ten years and would collapse at any moment. Regardless, he stood rigidly straight, head held high and proud, face betraying nothing. Beside him stood a man with a bloody cloth wrapped around his hand. The older man was looking anxiously at his Lord, as if preparing himself to catch Stanis should he falter._
“Is it over, then?”

Ned nodded. He’d heard stories of Stannis over the years, and met the man a few times. Robert described him as a cold, aloof, and with no sympathy in his soul. Ned had concurred. “King Robert I, First of His Name, now sits on the Iron throne.”

Stannis had nodded, once. He’d ordered a servant to see Ned’s men properly housed, and then turned and walked away.

Stannis may not be the warmest man, but as Ned followed silently behind the king, he thought Robert’s words unfair. If the Tyrell army had not been occupied at Storm’s End, the war may have had a very different conclusion. To withstand a siege of that magnetite, with no previous war experience, spoke strongly of Stannis’s skill as a commander.

In the small council chambers, Jon Arryn stood before a ornate wooden table with a parchment in his hand. Seated around him was the Grand Maester, Pycelle; Robert’s Master of coin, and the Master of laws—whose named Ned didn’t know. Varys the eunuch, the Master of whispers—or the Spider, as he was better known—nodded at them, smiling benignly. Ned’s skin crawled, the way the man watched everything around him always made Ned uncomfortable. The last two seats, traditionally held by the Head of the Kingsguard and the yet-unnamed Master of ships remained empty. Robert had confided in Ned of his mistrust of Lord Commander Barristan Selmy, due to the man’s insistence that the Kingslayer Jamie Lannister be sent to the Wall. Ned had agreed with the man, much to Robert’s irritation.

“The man did the world a bloody favour, Ned! Seven hells, that old Mad bastard deserved that and more!”

“He broke his Oath, Robert. You can’t trust an oathbreaker. And don’t tell me you wouldn’t have sent him away, had he not been Tywin Lannister’s son.”

“Gods damn you, Ned. You and your honor!” he’d sneered “You don’t know what its like, having to rule these bloody kingdoms! And here I’d hopped your bastard would do you some good.”

Furious, Ned had walked, vowing to leave.

They’d reconciled a day latter, opinions unchanged.

“Your Grace,” the men greeted them, and Jon Arryn stepped forward. “Good tidings. Lord Stannis has taken Dragonstone. I know many doubted him when he set sail before all the ships were complete, but it seems to have been a stoke of luck. The raging storm on the Blackwater decimated the Targaryen fleet. They were shattered against the rocks, destroyed by their own island. Stannis took the castle quickly, and most inside surrendered. The remaining are dead.”

Robert slammed his fist against the table, startling them all. A bloodthirsty grin stretched his face. “Even the gods curse those monstrous creatures! Ah, how I wish I’d been there myself! I miss the thrill of battle. He’s killed them, then? The Mad King’s whore and her whelp? Of course he has, that cold bastard! Good! Now the snakes are finally gone.” He inhaled deeply and nodded his head, “Lyanna’s been avenged. Finally.”

Ned felt sick. He’d never met Queen Rhaella; she’d stayed in King’s Landing with her young son during the tourney at Harrenhal. But he could imagine a frail beauty with violet eyes and silver hair cowering from Stannis, her young son in her arms. He violently banished the thought away.

Thank the gods I didn’t tell Robert the truth. If he celebrates the death of Rhaegar’s mother and
Jon Arryn sighed deeply, “No, Your grace. I regret to say things didn’t go quite as planned. Viserys escaped, spirited away by the remaining loyalists, Ser Willem Darry amongst them. No one knows where they could have gone, but Essos is likely. The Free Cities, probably. They have no supporters remaining in Westeros.”

Robert began to shake, face flushing a dark red. Everyone tensed, prepared for another outburst of rage. However, when Robert spoke, his voice was unexpectedly controlled. “A young boy and a few men?” he scoffed. “They had to have left in a hurry, so no recourses and no support. They won’t get far. Find them, Varys!” he ordered.

The bald man coolly nodded, benign smile in place. “Of course, Your grace. I have many Little Birds in Essos.”

Ned couldn’t bring himself to ask what Robert would do when Viserys was found. Hopefully it would take a long time, and his fresh rage and grief would cool enough to keep a level head.

“What about the que—Lady Rhaella?” Ned asked. “You didn’t mention her escape.”

For a moment, Jon Arryn looked uncomfortable. His hesitation was enough to prompt Robert to snatch the parchment away. They were silent as he read, and Ned’s blood chilled as he watched an unholy look of hatred steal over his friend’s face. Even Varys frowned and looked briefly away, his façade slipping before he could adopt a look of polite curiosity. Whatever the news was, Ned was suddenly certain the Spider already knew.

“Be prepared to welcome Stannis with the full court present. A feast in his honor, as well. If the Blackwater remains calm, he should be here in a few days. It seems my brother has finally done something right.” Robert thrust the parchment away and left, too full of exited energy to remain any further.

Ned snatched up the parchment, ignoring the fact that he had no right to read it. No one said a thing.

*Dragonstone has been reclaimed, and the island is once more under the power and protection of the crown. A storm destroyed the Targaryen fleet, and we were able to dock unopposed. The remaining loyalists have surrendered or fallen.*

*The former prince, Viserys of House Targaryen has escaped. Ser Willem Darry is amongst his party.*

*The former Queen, Rhaella of House Targaryen, perished in childbirth.*

*I sail for King’s Landing on the morrow, with the infant—the ink was thicker at start of the following word, as if Stannis had hesitated when writing the name—Daenerys of House Targaryen. She will be relinquished to his Grace, King Robert Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm, to be judged for the crimes her family has committed against of realm.*

Lord Stannis of House Baratheon

He met Jon Arry’s worried gaze, feeling the blood drain form his face. “Robert wouldn’t—we can’t let him—Jon, please. He can’t come back from this if he—”

“No,” Jon said, swiftly coming to place a comforting hand on Ned’s shoulder. “No, no, of course not. Rhaegar’s children—his wife—that was the Lannisters, Ned. Robert did not order it; took no joy in it, though he may not—may not act as such.” Still, Jon Arryn’s gaze remained concerned, staring
after his king. He breathed in deeply. “Don’t worry, Ned. You know him, Robert is passionate, but even he wouldn’t—” The Hand swallowed. “Child slaying—a king can’t come back from that. It would also be…kinslaying—” The Hand broke off, as if the word was too much for him.

Yes, Ned knew the history of House Baratheon, of how Robert’s grandmother had been the Princess Rhaelle Baratheon nee Targaryen. But no one ever brought up the Targaryen blood in Robert’s veins, not when they knew how he’d react. Even though, ironically, Ned suspected that his lineage was a reason that the nobles and smallfolk had so easily yielded when he claimed the throne.

*Of course Robert wouldn’t sanction that. I know him. My brother by choice.*

“I apologize, My Lords” Ned said, stiff with embarrassment that he’d been so open before these strangers. “I am not myself. It has been a—difficult few years. His Grace would never contemplate such atrocities. If you will excuse me.” Ned gave a brief nod, and turned sharply to leave. On his way out, his eyes locked on the Iron Throne. The sun shone in from the stained-glass windows behind the empty chair, casting a menacing shadow over the hall. From a certain angle, it looked like the jagged teeth of a great beast, hungering to devour them all.

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“The Lord Stannis of House Baratheon, brother to his Grace King Robert Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm!” At the herald’s announcement, the court parted swiftly, anticipation in the air as the great doors at the end of the throne room opened. Somehow, news of Stannis’s young charge had spread throughout the Keep, and no doubt into the city below. Stannis had never been a popular man, and Ned doubted even half of these preening peacocks would have been present to greet him had he been alone. And they looked much too excited to be here unwillingly, despite the King’s decree.

Striding purposefully past the gawking crowed, Stannis Baratheon made an impressive sight. He stopped before the Iron Throne, standing tall and somber. He was in full armor, cape flowing behind him. The only decoration was the green sigil of his house upon his left breast. Otherwise, the armor was a brutal grey, and cape just a shade darker. At his side, he held his helm; plain and undecorated, unlike those popular amongst most lords and knights. Unlike the last time Ned had seen him, nearly a year ago at Storm’s End, the man’s face had filled out, eye-bags gone, and body once again strong with muscle. Stannis was shorter than his brother, and leaner, but looking at him, one couldn’t help feeling intimidated by uncompromising gaze. Despite being younger than Robert, Stannis seemed older.

Beside him was the man with greying hair Ned had seen at Storm’s End. Ser Davos Seaworth. He was unfailingly loyal to Stannis, despite how the young Lord had cut off his fingers for his past as a smuggler. The Ser’s mouth was set in a grim line, a faint disapproval on his face. The other two men were guards, and in between them was a slight woman, pale with blond hair, who was curled up over the small bundle in her arms. The woman was shaking, tears and anger in her pale blue eyes as she swept her gaze over them. From his place to the left of Robert’s throne, Ned saw the sweat beading on her brow, desperation on her face. Whoever this woman was, she had been fiercely loyal to the former queen, and, thus, to the babe she clutched in her arms.

“Our Grace,” Stannis bowed deeply, ever formal. A stranger would not have known they were kin, that was how cold his greeting was. “I bring before you Daenerys of House Targaryen, child of the former King, Aerys II of the House Targaryen, and former queen…Rhaella of House Targaryen.”
Stannis words were crisp and formal, but Ned wondered at his paused before the queen’s name.

Robert leaned forward, “Let’s see the spawn! Come forward, girl. Now!”

The blond maiden shook further, and beside her the guards tensed. Ned had the suspicion that she’d tried to get away before, and thus Stannis ordered her watched. When she didn’t move, and Robert’s scowl grew, Ser Davos swiftly stepped towards her and gently took her arm, urging her forward. Stannis’s face remained unchanged, looking calmly at Robert.

“Please,” she whispered, though in the silence of the court, all heard her. “Please, Your Grace, have mercy. Please, she’s just a babe. Not even a week old. She didn’t do anything.”

“I said show me the spawn, damn you!” Robert snapped. Ned pressed his mouth together, but didn’t speak. He saw members of the court share secret glances. Stannis’s face remained unchanged, but Ned saw the increased tension in his jaw.

Crying quietly, the young woman slowly unwrapped the white blanket surrounding the child, allowing it to fall to the floor. The baby girl was covered in a tiny prink dress, completely covered. Small pearl buttons dotted the dress from neck to hem. Ned saw the telltale silvery strands of hair upon her head, and knew her identity even before the maid turned her around, holding her around the middle, legs dangling. The tiny girl was awake, her Targaryen-violet eyes were wide and curious as she regarded them. Tiny, excited babbles emerged from her mouth, and she squirmed in the maid’s arms.

A small, innocent child. Is this what the young Prince Aegon looked like? Had Princess Elia sobbed like this maid did, when her enemies had found her? When her son had been murdered as she watched?

Ned’s stomach churned, and he feared he was about to vomit before the bloody throne.

“Definitely the Mad King’s whelp,” Robert spat, and Ned felt a part of his love for his friend die.

The king turned to one of his White Cloaks. “Take her,” he ordered, and the man stepped forward to obey. Beside him stood the Kingslayer: Jamie Lannister’s face was pale, lips bloodless as he stared at the girl. For once, Ned felt sympathy for the boy.

“No!” the handmaid screamed, garbing the girl close and whipping around. She tried to run towards the doors, but Stannis’s men quickly intercepted. Ser Davos was looking helplessly between her and his lord, lips open in protest. Stannis remained still, not looking behind him, still staring at Robert, totally implacable. But Ned noticed a tiny muscle throbbing in his cheek, and his hands were clenched.

“Please, Your Grace, please!” The girl continued to scream. Fighting her captives and holding the babe tight. Sensing the distress, Daenerys began to whimper, eyes filling with tears. “She’s just a baby! She’s no threat to you, please! We’ll go away! To Essos, the Free Cities, anywhere! We’ll never come back, I swear it. I swear it! Let her live!”

The White Cloak tore the baby from her arms, and pushed the maid away when she tried to reclaim her. The girl fell hard, blonde hair in disarray as she crawled forward, trying to grab his cloak as he withdrew. Her face was bloated from sobbing, flushed a dark red. Ser Davos knelt beside her, trying to offer comfort as she sobbed, face in her hands. The knight looked beseechingly at his lord, but Stannis still resolutely faced Robert. Ned’s disgust towards the emotionless man was increasing. No sympathy in his soul, indeed.
In the White Cloak’s rough hold, Daenerys began to cry, whimpers filling the hall. He took his place beside the Lannister boy, who looked away from the child, swallowing hard. The crown watched, totally silent, but while once there had been anticipation on their faces, now they were all grim. Perhaps there was hope for King’s Landing yet.

“Your Grace!” another Kingsguard stepped forward. Barristan Selmy. “Have mercy, I beg you! She is a child.”

Robert’s face twisted in rage. “I knew your loyalty was still to the Dragons!”

The knight’s mouth gaped open in shock.

Ned stepped forward, mouth open to join the protest. His loyalty had never been to the Targaryen’s; he could make Robert see reason.

“What will you do with her?” The cold voice cut through the room, and Ned turned, surprised to see Stannis take a hard step forward. “What do you plan for her, Robert!”

Not emotionlessness, not at all. The man had been trying his best to keep his emotion hidden.

Robert surged up form the throne. “You dare question your King!”

Stannis took another step forward. His hand went to the pommel of his sword. The Kingsguard reacted alike, stepping forward in as one, blades sliding from their sheaths. The one holding the crying Daenerys thrust her roughly into the arms of a nearby servant. Only Jamie Lannister and Barristan Selmy hesitated, before following reluctantly suit.

Stannis ignored them all, storm-blue eyes fixed upon his brother. He did not draw his sword, but his hand remained upon it. Ned found himself torn, but knew in the end, if it came down to it, which side he would choose. “I question my brother, who I fear could make a terrible mistake in his anger. She is our kin, Robert. She is our blood, and she is innocent of all wrong done by her family.”

“She is no kin to me! She is the Mad Kind’s daughter!” Robert bellowed, enraged. “Sister to a murderous whoreson, who raped my queen! Madness runs in her veins, you fool!”

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“What do you plan for her, Robert!”

“Are you going to kill her?” Stannis asked, not holding anything back. “Are you going to murder her, Your Grace!”

The hall was silent, even Daenerys seems to be holding her breath.

Roberts eyes widened. For a moment, a terrible struggle was on his face, and he looked around, noticing the somber eyes of the court, Ned’s own pleading face. He turned last to Jon Arryn, whose concern was clear. His face paled in shock, and he sank heavily onto the iron throne. “How—how could you all think that of me? Of course, I won’t kill her!”

The hall was silent for a beat, and then Daenerys released a mighty cry, and it was like they could all suddenly breathe again. Ned slumped, heart pounding.

I’m such a fool.

Stannis too seemed to slowly relax, nodding once. He stepped back, and the Kingsguard slowly sheathed their weapons. The stoic man’s lips were pressed together, regret obvious.

“Her brother is across the Narrow Sea, and I will keep her as a hostage to ensure he never tries to steal the throne,” Robert explained, voice dull. Their doubt had hit him hard. Ned’s guilt threatened
to swallow him. Until Robert said, “The dragonspawn will grow up here, and learn her place.” A cruel light entered his eye. “There are many in King’s Landing who suffered her father’s madness. Who lost family to her brother’s tyranny. I’m sure they’ll delight in her presence. And, if she grows up to follow her mad sire’s footsteps… I’ll have her executed.”

The court began to buzz, staring at the doomed girl. Ned swallowed. Yes, she would live. But perhaps she would grow to wish she hadn’t. The blonde maid, whose face had filled with hope, crumbled. “No,” she moaned, hopeless. Ned closed his eyes. Daenerys would grow to be a beautiful girl; hated by the king and half the court, with no protection. Anyone who tried to help her would surely be punished. Ned could envision many sickening things happening to a lovely, lonely girl. One day, she would snap, and Robert would have an excuse to kill her.

Ned couldn’t allow that to happen. He stepped forward, drawing Robert’s attention. He would take her to Winterfell; she could grow up with her family, though neither would ever know it. Yes, the Targaryen’s were despised in the north, and it wouldn’t be an easy life, but he could at least protect her.

“Your Grace,” Stannis bowed deeply. “Allow me to take the girl as my ward.”

Ned jerked his head towards him, mouth agape. Robert’s expression matched his, and the court gasped.

“I have shamed myself today. I have shamed you, my brother. My king.” The words were spoken precisely, without emotion. His head remained deeply bowed. “I doubted you wisdom, your grace. I was a fool. Allow me to take the dragonspawn and raise her as my punishment. Every time I look at her, I will remember this shame. She will bring me endless torment, and I deserve it. She will find no warmth, no comfort in my household. You know me well enough to know that.”

Robert sat forward slowly. “And why should I do that, instead of just raising her here?”

Stannis paused, and straitened. “She will grow to look just like him. Just like her brother. I would spare you that, my king. I would space you those memories.” Robert frowned, looking at the babe with a scowl. “She will grow up alone, at my mercy—which you know I lack.” Stannis looked around at the court.

“Furthermore,” Stannis paused, deliberately, “she will be surrounded by members of House Baratheon. Here at court, there may still be some treacherous Targaryen loyalists who may try to save her. Here, she could escape; join her brother with the support of whoever helped her, and threaten your reign. I assure, that will never happen in my house. However, if by some miracle it does,” Stannis paused, “I will come to you and offer my head.”

Robert stared at his brother in contemplation. Then his gaze swept the gathered highborn lords and ladies, pausing on Ser Selmy a tad too long, mind whirling with doubts about their true loyalties.

“I was going to appoint you master of ships,” the king said, eyes returning to his brother. “To commemorate your success, despite the fact that you allowed the boy to escape. But after today’s display, I doubt your loyalty and your wisdom.”

Stannis bowed, face expressionless. “I deserve nothing less, Your Grace.”

“Alright, Stannis of House Baratheon. Take the bitch and make her miserable, as I know you make everyone.” The king leaned forward, smile cruel. “You will raise her in you home, reminded of everything she cost you. At Dragonstone.”
Stannis jerked straight before he could stop himself. He opened his mouth but bit back his words. Ned looked at his friend, shocked at his cruelty. Stannis was rightful Heir of Storm’s End. He’d fought and starved and bled to protect it. Yet Robert was essentially denying him his birthright.

“I, Robert Baratheon, the First of my Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm, name you Stannis of House Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone. May that bloody dour castle and dragon carvings bring you and your ward joy. And remind you both, every day, of what you have lost.

“Furthermore,” Robert continued, watching his brother like a hawk “I name Renly Baratheon Lord of Storm’s End. He deserves it.”

Stannis’s hands shook, and Ned saw him clench them until they were bloodless. Stiffly, he bowed before the king. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

He straightened and turned to go.

“Wait! One more thing. I need to reward my friend, Lord Eddard Stark, for his unwavering loyalty.” There was the bite of sarcasm in Robert’s voice, and Ned knew he remembered the doubt on his face when Stannis accused him of earlier. Ned too had doubted the king. This would be no reward. Stannis paused, reluctantly turning to face his brother, as did Ned.

“Honorable Ned Stark begat a bastard during the war, a poor boy who will grow with no prospects, no future, and no hope that any woman in her right mind would willingly wed him. I cannot in good consciousness allow my friend’s son to grow up like that!” A smile stretched the king’s face. “When the dragon bitch is of age, if she hasn’t already gone mad, she will wed Ned’s Bastard. She will take his name, and the proud dragon’s blood will forevermore birth a line of Snows. And Honorable Ned stark will be tied to the dragonspawn. And all the North shall know it!”

Ned’s face grew ashen, and his lips trembled. No. No, anything but this. Don’t force this on me, Robert. You don’t understand!

“Promise me, Ned…”

“Robert—your grace!” he tried to protest. “She—she is highborn. She cannot wed–”

“Are you refusing your king’s gift, Lord Stark? I am giving your bastard a future! A beautiful bride in his bed, a highborn bride. More than he could ever attain alone! Am I not a generous friend, Lord Stark?”

Ned knew then that he couldn’t refuse. Robert was truly angry with him, like never before. Voice choked, Ned slowly bowed. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Excellent! Now, My Lords and Ladies, a feast awaits! To honor my brother, my friend, and a new betrothal! Make sure you come, Stannis, Ned. You are the guests of honor.” The king rose from his chair and walked down the jagged steps. Clasping his brother on the shoulder when he passed. Stannis didn’t react. After the king had left, and had much of the court, Stannis turned to the blond girl, who had arisen and, clutching at Ser Davos for support, stared after the king.

“Get the girl, and seven hells, shut her up!” he ordered, nearly shouting at the end. He whipped around and strode from the room, emotion in every heavy step.

The girl jerked forward and ran to the hapless servant who was still holding the whimpering babe. She snatched her charge from his arms, glaring fiercely, and quickly rocked the girl, cooing until she quieted. The child looked exhausted, and Ned knew how she felt. Smile wide, relieved, the girl
quickly followed after Stannis, beaming at Ser Davos.

Ned stood there beside the throne, staring after them, until the hall was empty. Then he looked up, out the windows at the pale summer sky.

“The gods are strange, Lyanna,” he whispered. “Born half a continent apart, Houses bitter enemies, and yet still blood calls to blood. It’s like it was fated, and we foolish mortals are just here to be laughed at while the gods enact their will. How would you have felt about this? Relieved, horrified? If the rebellion had ended differently, if you had both lived…would you have wed them anyway? If she had escaped with her brother across the narrow sea, would they still have met one day? Is it inevitable?”

Ned Stark forced his legs to move. He should have left the day after he'd told Robert the news. Retreated home with Jon and his wife and his newborn son. All of this could have been avoided. Now he was trapped here, and gods help him, but he could not stomach seeing the Iron Throne for one moment longer.

*Built by Aegon the Conquer. A symbol of a dynasty that should have ended. And yet in a few years, Daenerys Targaryen will wed another Aegon Targaryen. And together, they will be the single greatest threat to the realm, and to my king.*

"And I can tell no one."
Robert holds a final feast, Stannis contemplates his future, and the Lords of Winterfell and Dragonstone come to an agreement.

Stannis Baratheon was not one to drink, but as the feast took place around him, laughter and music and talk, he was tempted. He eyed the full cup before him, some type of sweet Dornish wine—or something Dornish, at least. All he saw was a red liquid, and Stannis had neither interest nor need to learn about the various types of wine and drink flowing freely around him. The King, he glanced down the table, two to the left, was well into his cups already. Robert, he knew, was as ignorant as Stannis about the differences between wines; he simply drank all of them. Face flushed red, the king laughed like a fool at the performance going on before him. For the life of him, Stannis could not have explained what said performance was, or why it was so humorous.

Of course, that right there was the crux of all the problems between the brothers. They would never understand each other, though Stannis had tried. All his childhood, he’d tried. But Robert had simply thrown those efforts into his face, time and again, all the wile he’d rub his closeness with the wolf in Stannis’s face.

You see, brother? This is who you should have been like. This is what you should have been like. Then maybe I’d have loved you.

Stannis ground his teeth together, grasped the cup, and drowned the bitter liquid in a few swallows. Robert has never actually said the words, of course; but Stannis had known the truth. Everyone, without fail, adored his brother, while maintaining a polite distance from him. Damn them all, he didn’t need them. He knew who he was and what his life was for. He knew his responsibilities, and they occupied his time.

But—they’re gone now, too. Storm’s End, gone. The small comfort he’d managed to find running the familiar fortress, and ensuring it ran smoothly, had slipped from his grasp. What would he do with no people to manage? Well, Stannis didn’t really care about the people of Sorm’s End. He had no interest in the lives of the smallfolk or the amusements of the highborn. He had no care for what they felt and what they wanted. As long as everything was running smoothly, as long as there was peace within his lands, and as long as crimes were punished justly, Stannis was content. That is my duty; and that is all I need.

Order. Peace.

A home, something whispered, but it’s gone now. Stannis ruthlessly banished the thought, holding up his empty cup until it was full, and then emptying it again.

Perhaps Robert is onto something with this swill. Thoughts are their own poison.

He would simply have to start from scratch, he reasoned ruthlessly. Learn Dragonstone one cliff at a time, one beach at a time. He would understand what the people needed; what they lacked; what conflicts existed that he must address. He would bring his personal household from Storm’s End; the servants that knew his preferences well, and then he would settle into his new role.
And when the petty squabbles are resolved, when the people are fed? What will you do then? Not Master of ships, not Lord of Storm’s End. Just a bloody caretaker to a cold castle and a hated child.

Is that your end, Stannis Baratheon? He ground his teeth, nearly cracking them. He drowned a third goblet. At least the servants of King’s Landing knew when the keep the wine coming—with a king like Robert, they need the skill. No wonder all these fools always had to feast and fuck and squabble over a chair; they have nothing better to do; and one can’t spend all his time drunk.

They king bellowed in joy, bits of food and wine spewing from his mouth and dribbling down his silk tunic. Laughing, after he’d ripped away the only small comfort Stannis possessed. Laughing, when he’d all but exiled him to the castle of the Dragons. So that I may remember what I have lost.

He would rebuild the town, he contemplated desperately. Surely the Targaryens had let it decline into a state of disrepair. He would inspect the buildings, fix damages, build news one, if I need to. He would fortify the castle’s defenses, too, for no good reason. He would ensure that nothing and no one could ever breach those walls.

Only a bloody dragon will be able to get in uninvited—and all the dragons are dead.

Yes, this is what he would do. Look for problems: and fix them. Stannis was good at that; he had the patience for it. I will need to see what can be farmed on the island, what food could be cultivated in case of a siege. Fish, easily, but their enemies would make the task difficult. They would have to build up their stores; large enough to survive well over a year—more. He could send men to explore the caves, too. Who knows what minerals they could find—perhaps gems as well. Many would pay a hefty sum for a shiny rock. He could open trade with the Free cities, host merchants and have them inspects the wears.

And after that? How many years will that occupy, Stannis?

Curse you to the seven hells, Rhaella. You and your daughter and your entire bloody line!

And curse me, too, for being such a fool. One deathbed command and suddenly Stannis Baratheon was made to yield like a common dog. So much for having a heart of ice. He emptied his goblet once more, no longer even tasting the wine. Davos, who was seated somewhere down below because he didn’t deserve the honor of being at the High Table, was probably watching Stannis in concern.

Let him look. What does it matter now?

“Robert would tell me that you never partook in drink. That you believed yourself too good for it,” said the man beside him, attempting to initiate conversation for the third time. He was proof that the gods were a joke. Why couldn’t honorable Eddard Stark simply comprehend that Stannis did not wish to talk to him or listen to him or even bloody see him. The man had everything; he would even get Rhaella’s daughter, eventually, and then Stannis would truly be useless.

“He would tell me that the two of you had absolutely nothing in common,” Ned continued, grating on Stannis’s last nerve.

“Robert liked to fight, hunt, drink, and, when we got older, whore” Stannis spat. “I don’t see the point in inflicting, and attaining, pointless injuries, killing for pleasure, or losing myself in drink. Although that last one is gaining a certain appeal. As for whoring,” he sneered. “There is something uniquely pathetic about lying with a woman paid to do so. The only time he and I got along is when we were discussing war; but even then, he ignored me half the time.”
There, he’s indulged the man. Perhaps Eddard Stark would leave him alone now. He had matters to consider, plans to make, a future in need of scrutiny.

* * *

*I should marry,* he thought suddenly. Yes, that’s what he needed. A wife and children. That would give him many years of responsibilities. Robert would have to marry soon, probably with a queen the Lannister’s could control; if not a Lannister herself. *Doesn’t Tywin have a daughter?* After Robert’s wedding, he could look for his own bride; he was a lord, many fathers would jump at the chance.

*Except they know you don’t have the King’s favour, and no opportunities to ascend to power. Plus, you’ll be harboring the most hated child in the kingdoms. Any houses that try to curry favour will be met with suspicion from the crown. Your wife and her family would have to tolerate the scorn. What a compelling prize you are, Stannis.*

“He would tell me many things, during our years at the Eyrie.” Eddard continued, “Stories of you; of how you wouldn’t forgive the smallest mistake, how you had no joy within your heart, how you have never shown concern or compassion for any person in your life. After I met you, I believed him.”

Stannis swung around at that, furious. How dare he! “I am happy to see that my brother,” he snapped, “found such a likeminded companion. I would so hate for his friends to have thoughts of their own. After all, with Robert, having an *opinion* could result in a man being related through marriage to the child *whose House murdered his family.*”

Ned’s steel eyes darkened, long face growing even grimmer, if that was possible. Eddard was as cold and aloof as Stannis, people said, and yet Robert liked him! Or had liked him, at least. Now he was in the same boat as Stannis, so perhaps there was some justice in the world.

*Don’t be a fool. Robert will suck up to him any day now, pathetically trying to get his Dog back.*

“Why did you do it? If you are as cold as he says, why did you take in the Targaryen babe?” At least he *doesn’t call her ‘dragonspawn’ like all the others.* Ned, he knew, had been horrified by what happened to the young prince Aegon and his sister, the princess Rhaenys. He’d thought the man had ended his friendship with Robert for good, after that. He wondered what else Ned was willing to forgive, eventually. How far could Robert go?

“I believe I made myself clear in court,” Stannis said curtly. “I doubted my king and this is to be my punishment. It is a just one.”

*But taking away Storm’s End was not.*

“Why did you question him? You brought the girl here, you gave her to him. You knew what could happen. So why? You put you hand upon you pommel; if he had decreed that she would die, would you have drawn your sword?”

Stannis looked coldly into Ned’s earnest eyes. Damn the man for his *goodness.* “I will not stand idly by while a child is murdered, nor will I allow my brother to become a kinslayer; no matter how passionately he denies the relationship, the realm will not. I have a duty to my family to protect our House.”

Stannis studied the man before him. “And you, Stark? Had your beloved Robert ordered her death, would you have stood by and obeyed your king? You put him upon the throne, after all—basically gave it to him. Her father murdered your own, *and* your brother. *Her* brother kidnapped and killed your sister. Would you really have stopped Robert?”
Ned’s eyes frosted. “An unborn child did not murder my family. An unborn child did not burn people alive. And an unborn child certainty doesn’t deserve to pay for those crimes. She should only have to pay for her own. Before you spoke, I was going to plead with Robert to allow me to take her to Winterfell. I would have protected her. She would have grown up amongst my children.”

Stannis’s mouth twisted in a bitter smile. “And now she has to grow up with me. It seems I did it all for nothing. Lost it all for nothing!”

“No,” Ned protested softly. “You showed many people the type of man you are. It wasn’t for nothing.”

Stannis didn’t like the warmth in the man’s voice. It was too much like pity. “What is it you want, Stark? What does it matter, what type of man I am?”

Ned took a breath. “In a few years, the children will be grown, and they’ll have to go through with this marriage.”

“Yes, a former princess married to a landless bastard. You’ll have to fix that, Stark. She is still highborn, no matter her family, so your whelp must at least be a lord. I’m sure the north will love that; not only will some bannerman be losing land, but to a bastard and a Dragon. Robert is a fool; even in anger he should never have decreed this farce of a union.”

Ned’s eyes darkened, anger simmering. “I doubted the king; I accept this punishment. I will take care of my own land, Baratheon. It’s not your concern.”

“Except that it is, for it will be my ward who will marry into your family. Customs and standards must be met.” Stannis had, somehow, been roped into caring for the child for life, not just until her marriage. Rhaella was a shrewd woman. And thus, he would see it all through properly—Daenerys was a highborn daughter of a great family, she would be raised as such, and married as such. Eddard Stark had his own responsibilities towards the union.

“Will you ask Robert to legitimize your bastard? Or give him a new name and form a new house?” Strangely, Eddard Stark seemed genuinely shocked by the proposal. Stannis frowned; surely the man had considered it—he was taking the child into his home, he had to care for it.

“N-No,” he stumbled, eyes shifting away. “I…I, uh, w-will not dishonor my current wife…in that manner. Our children will inherit Winterfell.” Ned breathed deeply, calming, while Stannis regarded him suspiciously. “Besides,” he continued, “Robert made it clear that he wanted her wed to a bastard. I can give him land, but I can’t grant him legitimacy.”

Stannis looked away. “Well then. I suppose this discussion is over.”

“Wait,” Ned said. “I need to be assured that…that the girl will be treated with honor in your household. That she’ll be protected. I know what Robert envisioned her life being like in King’s Landing, and I cannot—will not tolerate it.”

Stannis met the man’s resolute gaze, and nodded, once. “She will be raised as a highborn daughter, and not anything less. I know what His Grace wanted for her—but I don’t need to terrorize children to entertain myself, nor would I stain my household’s reputation in that way.”

Stannis stood, finished with this conversation and this bloody feast—but then hesitated. He looked down at Eddard Stark. “Hear me, Stark. Raise your bastard well, into a man that does not punish his wife for matters out of her control. A man that will show her the respect due her as a daughter of a great House, and as a Ward to House Baratheon. I will know, if you do not. Even after they marry, I
will tolerate nothing less."

Stannis didn’t wait for a response; he’d said his piece.

*Curse you, Rhaella, for I will do as you bid me. It’s too late for anything else.*
Wolf's Promise

Chapter Summary

A letter arrives, the dead are mourned, and a promise is broken.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Their first month back in Winterfell had been difficult. Catelyn took Jon’s presence much worse than he’d anticipated, and refused to even look at the boy. Furthermore, whenever Ned approached her, she was so chillingly polite to him that he couldn’t converse with her for more than a few moments without escaping, tail between his legs. She kept his son, Robb, near her at all times, so even the joy elicited by the sight of his boy was sparse. It didn’t help that she was having a very hard time acclimating to the Norther climate, and seemed determined to resent him for it, too.

Ned has been so tired, so grief stricken, that he’d spent the first month doing little but trying to feebly participate in the running of Winterfell, and spending most of his time in the Gods Wood, sitting against the Heart Tree, hoping for an answer. He may have continued the pattern well into the second month, had the raven not arrived.

Maester Lewin had handed him the parchment, eyes soft and understanding, and Ned had almost burned the thing when he say the Stag on the wax. A letter from Robert was the last thing he needed.

Robert had come to him the morning after that disastrous feast, hungover and deeply contrite: he’d let his anger get ahead of him, he claimed—he wanted to take it back. But he’d decreed it all before the court—there was no undoing it now, not unless he wanted to seem weak. He’d begged Ned’s forgiveness. However, for the first time, Ned had been unable to grant it. The consequences of the betrothal were too numerous to forgive so easily. Still, the young Stark lord recognised his own part in this mess: his doubt had hurt his friend, and Robert’s temper had gotten out of hand. They both acknowledged these truths, and the two had parted on amicable but strained terms.

But the message had not been from King’s Landing, but rather Dragonstone, said the master. Ned didn’t know if that made things easier or not. Stannis was a challenging man to understand, and Ned didn’t have the mental fortitude to tackle whatever scathing words were on the missive. He’d put it off for a week, before the shame had burned too painfully, and he’d had to open it.

To Lord Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, and Warden of the North

I write to you with the following proposal: Every two moons we shall exchange information about the activities we have begun or completed in regards to the betrothal between your son, Jon Snow, and my ward, Daenerys of House Targaryen. I foresee the marriage occurring within her 16th year, and not a moment sooner. Her nurse, the woman at court during the betrothal, insists on this age, though it is very late. I find myself in agreement, however: you will need time to properly educate your son. Furthermore, that should afford us both enough time to properly plan for their future—and for you to foster Jon Snow, if you deem it fit.
We should begin with details regarding the construction of their home. My research indicates that the North is a large territory, but with wide swaths of unpopulated land. I will need your expertise on locations that would be acceptable to begin construction of a castle. It must be of suitable size and strength befitting a former Princess, and I shall insist on powerful defences, so construction will take time. I will, of course, contribute in men and resources. Furthermore, men and smallfolk must be found to fill their lands, and support them with their incomes and agriculture. I have leaned of these ‘glasshouses,’ so constructing and populating a village is of paramount importance.

Next, I will inform you of what steps I have currently taken to ensure her proper education. I have acquired both a maester, to educate her on the realm, and a young daughter of House Velaryon, to instruct her in the intricacies of being a lady. I forewent a septa, for I do not believe she requires education in superstitious babble.

I will be expecting your reply in two moons.

Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone

Eddard had read the letter twice more, and then, unable to help it, had begun to laugh. He laughed so hard and so long that he was gasping for air, thankful he was at least alone in his chambers lest his people think him mad! Finally, he’d calmed enough to read though the letter once more, smiling, before he’d taken a deep breath and went to find the Maester. It was time to begin fulfilling his responsibilities.

He had a letter to respond to.

****

Now, one months later, first letter sent Eddard Stark held a single candle as he traversed the dark crypts of Winterfell, passing vigilant stone Lords and stone Kings, swords ready for battle, with their direwolf companions by their sides. The crypt felt simultaneously empty, yet full, as if the statues watched him and knew all, saw all. As if, should he sit before them, they would come alive and tell him stories of tragedies and triumphs long past.

You are not alone, Eddard, son of Stark, their eyes seemed to whisper, coming to life when hit by the flame of the candle. Come, tell us of your troubles. We shall swap stories.

But there was only one person Ned had come to see, on this day: her son’s Nameday. Her last day.

Promise me, Ned.

“Aye, I will,” he murmured, coming to stand before her silent statue. He had disobeyed tradition and had statues carved for her and Brandon, alongside their father. Staring into her was solemn, sad face, he noted that the carver had done a horrible job. The woman before him looked nothing like Lyanna: she may have Lyanna’s face and features, but she didn’t have her soul—he gazed upon a maiden, rather than a wolf. But then, no stonecarver that lived could ever hope to have such talent. Movements slow, Ned lit the candle at her alter and bowed deeply for one long moment, tears gathering upon his lashes. Then, he quietly placed a single flower before her, petals a delicate blue.

“A winter rose, Lyanna. A tribute for you both.”

I will always hate you, Rhaegar, for all the pain you’ve wrought. But I cannot fault you for loving her...nor she, you.
“I don’t know what you would think of all that’s occurred. Plans are being made, Lyanna, though slowly. We Northerners are a stubborn lot.”

And I, an inept lord...

“A betrothal to a Dragon! My lord, this is unacceptable! The king shames you, he shames the North!” So enraged was Greatjon Umber, that his fist rattled the hall when it struck the think wooden table. The giant man was shaking, face screwed up in rage as he stood amongst the bannermen in Winterfell’s Great Hall. “He spits on our loyalty, and for what! Because Eddard Stark opposed the murder of a babe! Any man of honor would have done the same!”

Men shouted in agreement, concurring. Ned’s developing headache throbbed. They had been at it for over an hour now, lord after lord making a point to let all know how of their protest. A calm discussion of events had rapidly deteriorated into ceaseless repetition of discontent.

Rickard Karstark stood from his place across the hall, face thunderous. “We put him on that bloody chair! We bled and fought at his side to oppose the Mad King!” He shouted, “We freed the continent from tyranny, and now he repays us with this! What was he thinking!”

Shouts of agreement, and more and more men rose to their feet, voices rising ever higher as they made their discontent known. All of Winterfell could probably hear their rage.

“My lords, enough! Enough, I say!” Eddard finally stood, voice thunderous. The hall silenced. “I was wrong to doubt my king—my loyal friend! I dishonored myself, and the North, when I believed that Robert would have truly ordered the death of a child.”

Roose Bolton, who had been silently observing until that point, stood, garnering immediate attention. The man always watched and rarely spoke needless words; but while that trait was usually something Ned valued in men, the lord Bolton made him wary. “My Lord, we all know you had just cause; the King should have known taken action against the Lannisters when they Sacked the city and murdered babes in their cribs. But he did not, and thus how could you have known that he would not condone further atrocities?” Heads nodded and murmurs of agreement filled the room. “However,” Roose continued, “while we wish no harm to come to the Targaryen babe, we cannot simply allow her to take residence within the North; not after all her family has done to us, and to House Stark.”

“Heard, hear,” men murmured, nodding along.

“Wedding her to your bastard, of all people, is also a profound slight. He now forces us to find accommodations, to build a bastard a castle and sup with him as if he is trueborn, and to populate his lands with men we can’t afford to lose. And all this, the king did in anger against you, who was like a brother to him—who placed him upon the Iron Throne rather than taking it himself.” A pause, long enough for Ned’s heart to beat thrice, before Roose asked, “How will you respond, Lord Stark? How will you respond against this attack on Northern honor?”

Finished, a small smile curving his lips, Roose sat, and all the lords turned to Ned, expectant looks on their faces. He faltered, gazing around, heart pounding.

He had no answer to give them.

“Had father, had Brandon, been here, they’d have known what to do. They’d have given a rousing speech and won the support of the lords.” A shuddering breath. “But I’m the only one left, Lyanna, and I have no idea what I’m doing.”
I was never supposed to rule. “I was supposed to—wanted to—marry a woman form a far, hot kingdom, and only have to worry about my own family and a small household.” Violet eyes, shining raven hair, golden-tanned skin, and that beautiful smile as they danced. “Now, I have to care for the whole North; my wife is cold to me; and my family is all but gone. Gods help me.”

He took a fortifying breath, pausing as if expecting an answer, and then slowly calmed. “But I know that past is gone, and I have to make strides towards the future. With my people, with my wife. It will be a difficult endeavour, Lyanna, but I will prevail.” He smiled ruefully, “I have also found myself with an unlikely ally, through the circumstances are less than ideal. Nevertheless, I like him more than I expected. Perhaps his advice is warranted.”

Ned paused again, staring at her face, half convinced she looked almost approving. “Finally, I come to today to beg for your forgiveness. I need someone a to oversee the construction of Jon’s castle, and care for it until he is of age. I need a man who I can trust above all others, a man who loved you more, perhaps, than we all did. He was the only one who protested your marriage, Lyanna. The only one who insisted that you should be allowed to choose. I think he blames me, for all of it. Deep inside, I think he hates me.”

He took a deep breath. “He will not do it for me, but to convince him, I may have to break my word. But you loved and trusted him, Lyanna, and I shall take that as a sign.”

*****

He found Benjen alone upon the battlements, staring north. His brother was pallid and skinny, hair stringy and unwashed. He was deteriorating more everyday, and Ned’s eyes burned to see it.

“I think I will join the Watch, Ned,” he said, quiet. “There is nothing for me here. No purpose, no laughter. Just ghosts and regrets. I have to leave this place, before I take my own life. Yes, I will join the Watch and die with honor.”

Ned swallowed hard, stomach cramping. “You can’t.”

Benjen slowly turned, meeting Ned’s eyes with a well of bitterness. “You are not my Lord, brother. I am telling you, not asking.”

Ned plowed ahead, heart pounding. “I need someone I trust to care for Jon’s lands until he is of age. I need you, Benjen. Please.”

For a moment, Benjen just stared at him, expressionless, and then he exploded in shocking rage. He pushed his face near Ned’s teeth gashing, eyes wild. “Are you fucking mad! You would order me—Me!—to take care of your bastard’s lands, the lands he will share with the woman whose House destroyed us! You ask me to live there, knowing that Lyanna is gone but a Targaryen still lives!”

Benjen stepped closer and pushed him, hard, until Ned slammed against the battlements, mere instances from a perilous drop. “I ask, not order,” he said quietly, heart pounding. “Please.”

Benjen spat in his face, murderous, and whipped around to leave. Ned surged forward and grabbed his arm, halting him. He took a fortifying breath, wiping the spittle from his cheek.

“Don’t do it for me… Do it for Lyanna.” Benjen was still for many heartbeats, and Ned’s anxiety was so high he was beginning to feel lightheaded. He shook it off, clenching his teeth.

Benjen turned, slowly, face leached of colour.

Promise me, Ned.
He swallowed, hard. “There is something I must tell you. About Lyanna…and Rhaegar.” His hands shook. “And about Jon.”

Chapter End Notes

I want to give a special shout out to queefqueen and MagnusXXZ whose comments always give me so much needed information. I'm very character focused, and I don't know what I'd to without them always giving me so much practical information about Westeros. Thank you, and enjoy!

:D
Stannis makes peace with the future, Ned rouses his Lords, and Daenerys makes a conquest.

When Stannis had returned to Storm’s End for the last time, he did so for Maester Cressen. He wished to bid the man farewell face to face; it was owed to him, after all, for everything the man had done to raise and educate a young Stannis Baratheon. How he had kept the lonely boy company while his brother and the other children ostracized him. Cressen was the only person who had faced Stannis’s brisk nature and cold replies with patience and gentle care; rather than anger and insult. The old man was the only one who understood that Stannis was not cruel, not cold; just dedicated, introverted, and painfully awkward. When Stannis told the man of his new position, and his new charge, he had meant the words as a farewell, and a thank you.

The Maester had taken it as an invitation. A fortnight later, when all the remaining details of the move to Dragonstone were complete, he appeared before Stannis’s door, his few belongings packed in three chests, ready to leave. He wished to meet his new pupil immediately, he insisted, and scolded Stannis for not bringing her. Daenerys had sailed back to Dragonstone with her nurse and some loyal guards. The man felt pity for a girl scorned by the continent; as he had felt pity for a young lord scorned by his family.

Stannis had protested: the Maester was of Storm’s End. Maesters followed the family, not its members. He should stay for Renly. But Cressen was stubborn, and waved it away.

“I’ve made my choice, Young Lord. I am a Maester, not a slave. You and that little girl need me far more than Lord Renly, or Storm’s End, ever will. Now, hurry and prepare—I don’t remember raising a tardy student.” Conversation finished, the man pushed past Stannis into the room, sat upon a chair, and gazed at the lord expectantly, waiting to be obeyed. Stannis complied, and, with his back towards Cressen, allowed a rare smile to bloom upon his grim lips.

Did I hope he would come with me? Yes…yes, I think I did.

Before leaving, they met up with Davos Seaworth, who had gone to collect his family. He returned to his Lord with his beloved wife, Marya, their young sons, and carts full of belongings. They had discussed it, and Marya decided that they should all join Stannis at Dragonstone, rather than separate. Davos had happily agreed, and together they set their affairs in order, leaving Rainwood in a castellans capable hands.

A week later, when they docked at Dragonstone, the Maester had scowled at the endless steps that marked the only passage into the fortress. “Stairs,” he spat. “The enemy of an old man’s bones. Ah, well. I suppose I won’t ever leave. And you are young, my lord; should I require anything, I can simply make you traverse them.” Stannis hadn’t denied the added duty.

Later, upon being introduced to the giggling baby girl, her violet eyes wide with wonder as she delighted in her surroundings, Cressen’s eyes had watered, and he’d smiled gently. “Ah, yes, this is what I have missed. A young, eager charge to guide. Hello, little princess. You and I shall get along splendidly.”
“She’s not a princess,” Stannis had automatically corrected, “Robert revoked the title.”

Myra and Cressen had scowled at him in union, and even baby Daenerys seemed offended. “Hush boy. I am sixty and four years old. I have seen Winters harsher than anything you can imagine. I know a princess when I see one,” he’d sniffed. Myra, and blonde-haired, blue-eyed nurse, who had endless loyalty towards the girl, had warmed to the Maester immediately. They’d chatted excitedly about the future, walking away and not sparing Stannis another glance.

Dismayed, Stannis got the uneasy feeling that he’d just witnessed the birth of a powerful alliance. He was suddenly concerned about who the real authority in this household would be. Still, Stannis could not deny how his tension drained as things all fell into place.

Now, Stannis stood alone on a tall balcony overlooking the Blackwater, Aegon’s famous Painted Table at his back, and surveyed his new holdings. Standing tall, eyes cool, and hands clasped behind his back, Stannis thought: Now then. Shall we begin?

*****

I find it a good tactic, when trying to lead men, to band them together under a common purpose. An enemy perhaps; or better yet: a cause, a belief, an illusion greater than themselves. You Northerners value honor above all else. Use that, Stark, as your weapon.

Sitting once more before the Lords of the North, his wife to his left and his Master to his right, Eddard Stark knew that he had a decision to make. Stannis’s words played in his mind; how he handled this meeting, Ned knew, would be a pivotal moment in his rule.

Staring down at his bannerman, who waited expectantly for him to speak, Ned slowly grew surer of himself. Yes, he decided. This is what was needed; this was the only way. But he would not manipulate or cajole; he would lay all the information on the table and allow them to decide. He would mix Northern honesty with Southern strategy.

Ned stood, allowing his naturally grim face to command their full attention. After waiting a beat, he spoke, voice serious. “My Lords, I have gathered you hear today to say that I do not have a decision for you.”

He watched them exchange surprised looks, but now he had their full attention. He ignored the bite of insecurity, plowing forward.

“All I have is honesty; all I have is my word, and my duty to you, my loyal bannerman. As well as my duty to the crown. When King Robert decreed that my son, Jon Snow, would wed the last Dragon, he did so in anger. But his anger was just. For I, Eddard Stark, his brother by choice, his sworn Lord, compromised my principles when I allowed southern politics to cloud my judgement. My king was right to reprimand me. A Lord is not beyond mistakes; and a Northern Lord must meet the consequences of his mistakes with dignity.”

He could see that the men were paying more carefully attention to him now. A few men were nodding, but the Lords of the more powerful houses remained unconvinced.

“However, wile the King’s punishment is hard, we must not see this as a slight, but as an opportunity. An opportunity to fulfil a long-ago oath that my ancestor, Lord Cregan Stark, made with the Dragons. The only Pact that the North has failed to honor. Yes, my Lords, the marriage between Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen will finally complete the Pact of Ice and Fire: and our duty—and tie—to the Dragons will finally be complete.”
Lord Jorah Mormont stood, garnering their attention. “The Targaryen’s voided any pacts between us when they broke their oaths and burned your Lord Father alive! Why should we, then, be beholden to ours!” There were murmur of agreement.

Ned stared them all down, before meeting Mormont’s eyes. “The North does not meet dishonor with dishonor, my lord. We are not southerners.”

Under his reprimanding gaze, Mormont flushed and sat. Ned saw that many other lords looked uncomfortable, but many more were nodding with agreement. Emboldened, he continued.

“We will show Westeros what the North is made of, my lords. That we are men of honor, above all else. That we fulfill our debts, no matter how many years pass, because to do otherwise would shame us. Eventually, had the Dragons not fallen, this marriage would have happened. We would have needed a castle, a village, and towns folks; we would have needed to sacrifice to keep our word. But the North does not allow paltry concern stop them from fulfilling a promise. From fulfilling the Pact we made!”

A chorus of agreement met his words.

“We will show the jaded, manipulative Southerners that the North Remembers! We cannot abide by a marriage with a trueborn son, because it would mean forgetting the past, but we also cannot forget our duty to uphold the vows of our ancestors! What would our forefathers say, hearing us talk of breaking their words! Of shamming them and ourselves! We will show all the lords of Westeros that the North is a place with strong, honest people, who remember! Men who keep their word! We will show them that we do not cower and bend from their silly games of spite!”

Voices, rose chorusing their support. Ned held his head high.

“Are you with me, my lords?”

“Aye!”

“Are you with me, with our forefathers, with the North!”

“Aye!”

“Will we, together, uphold the Pact of Ice and Fire!”

“Aye!” The room shook form their passionate proclamations, men rising to their feet to boldly declare their support. Only Roose Bolton remained sitting, scowl in place. But eventually he, too, stood in agreement.

“For Northern Honor!” Greatjon Umber shouted.

“To The Wedding of Ice and Fire!” Lord Karstark bellowed.

“To Lord Eddard Stark, Warden of the North!”

The men exploded in support, chanting the Stark name.

“Stark! Stark! Stark!”

Finally, relived and proud, Ned looked at his wife, who was staring at him for the first time without a look of cold distain. Her eyes were soft, awed, and slowly, she smiled a him.

Ned’s lips curled in return.
Ten months later, Stannis was about bursting with irritation. *Seven hells* but the Lords under his domain were a stubborn lot! They made a great show of being falsely pleasant, but their oaths of fealty were said in such saccharine tones that Stannis gathered they’d essentially meant that he could go fuck himself, for all they cared. They had no loyalty to Stannis, and everyone knew it. Cressen and Davos urged patience—something that Stannis usually had in abundance—and understanding; these men and women had gone from a place of power in the old regime, to essentially exiles under Robert.

Lord Ardrian of House Celtigar, a large man who much enjoyed his luxuries, was particularly *nice*, which Stannis was beginning to use as a measure of dislike. Most of the other Houses—both those sworn directly to Dragonstone and visiting from the crownlands—greeted the new Lord with similar displays. Strangely, House Velaryon, and its pale-haired, pale-eyed Lord Monford, seemed genuinely willing to make peace with Stannis. He did not understand: They’d been the staunchest Targaryen supporters, and yet now they seemed genuinely content under his rule. Cressen, when asked, had shrugged and responded that it was only natural, because of what Stannis had done for them.

Admittedly, Stannis supposed that taking in the Targaryen babe was a good reason for their behaviour. But the other Houses and landed knights of Dragonstone, Driftmark, Claw Island, Crackclaw Point, and the crownlands, *also* knew that he’d taken Daenerys in, and that certainly didn’t cease *their* animosity. *Ah well,* he’d reasoned, *at least I can make use of it.* Thus, he’d asked the Lord Monford for leave to have one of his daughters come from Driftmark to educate Daenerys. The Lord had been surprised, though Stannis didn’t know why; it was a perfectly natural course of action. All the same, the man had agreed, and next month Dragonstone would house Dyrnia Velaryon and her small retinue.

Stannis admitted that he’d also hoped to evaluate the woman, as he still had plans to marry. Making a Velaryon the Lady of Dragonstone should go a long way into getting the rest of the Houses to accept his rule; and besides, like every man, he needed heirs. What he did not understand was the strange reluctance he felt when thinking of his marriage, although he knew that he must do so. He was a Lord; his responsibilities were many, and a wife was one of them.

Stannis sighed. Since he’d arrived, very little work had actually been completed. The lords and knights played games and stalled whatever orders he gave. Stannis couldn’t even punish them as he wished, for he reasoned that it would do more harm than good. Davos concurred; he’d experienced the same behaviour when Stannis elevated him to Master of Rainwood. The people needed time to adjust, is all. To get to know and respect him as their Lord.

Stannis just hoped they did it soon, because he’d very much like them to desist in paying ‘unexpected visits to ensure their new Lord was well,’ and then insisting that he allow them to pay their respects to Daenerys. If Stannis refused, they grew somber and cast him suspicious looks, as if they suspect he was doing something nefarious to the child and trying to hide it! Seven hells, but he was tired of them ‘covertly’ looking the baby over—*sometimes right in front of me!*—and expecting to see injuries or neglect on the girl.

Irritated, Stannis rounded a corner and almost plowed right into a tiny form. Dressed in a blue concoction with many buttons and laces, her short hair interwoven with tiny silver ribbons, Daenerys Targaryen stood before him, nearly scaring the living daylights out him.

“Bloody—!” Stannis bit back the words, stumbling awkwardly to a halt inches from her, *aghast* to see Daenerys alone in the hall. She stood there, and gazing at him with wide violet eyes, mouth popped
open as if she was as similarly astonished by his presence. For a good minute, Lord and ward simply stared at each other, frozen.

_What in the world is her nurse thinking! The castle is too dangerous to allow an infant to traverse the halls alone!_

Angry, Stannis frowned severely, glaring at the empty corridor that suddenly seemed much more menacing than before. Her suite of rooms was down the hall and to the right, occupying a whole corner of the tower, and opposite of his own. He’d placed her and Myra in the Lady’s chambers, because he didn’t fully trust the people of this island, and his personal guard was too small to properly patrol this area as well as the nursery.

Despite his careful sweep, there was no Myra in sight. Scowling deeply, Stannis released a powerful exhale.

“Where is your--!” The infant gasped and flinched back, toppling over to fall onto her bum. Her wide eyes remained on him, now wary. To his horror, tears were gathering.

_Seven hells..._ Slowly, as is she was a feral animal, Stannis took a few steps back and crouched carefully, arms up in appeasement. All he needed was for some Lord or Knight or Myra to find him alone in the hall with a crying Daenerys. The rumours would spread like wildfire. And he was grimly sure that Cressen would attempt to flog him; verbally, if not physically.

“Calm, calm yourself, I am not angry,” he said quietly, smoothing his face into what he hoped was concern (but probably looked like indigestion). “Where is your nurse? Myra. Where is Myra?” She just stared at him, but at least she blinked away the tears.

Her mouth shut, and she pursed her lips at him, scrunching her small face in confusion. “Maaaai-raah,” Stannis articulated slowly, looking over his shoulder, but there was still no one in sight. “Mai-Rah. Your nurse. Blonde woman, blue eyes? Myra.” Then he realized that he was attempting to communicate with an infant, and cursed himself.

_Bloody hells, Stannis Baratheon, what are you doing?_

Looking behind her desperately, hoping for someone, anyone, to come and take her away, he was unprepared for her response. His eyes jerked back when she spoke, surprised.

“Raah,” she responded, testing the sound, the feel of the word on her tiny lips. She looked up, as if demanding confirmation. “Rah?”

“Yes!” he said, desperate. What a smart child! “Rah. Where is Rah?”

Daenerys looked over her shoulder, and then back at him. And then, seven hells, but then this ten-month-old infant looked him in the eye and shrugged.

In response to his gaping mouth, the girl giggled, seemingly proud to have reduced the mighty Stannis Baratheon to a speechless fool. _Perhaps this is punishment for rejecting the gods..._

Flabbergasted, and completely out of his depths, Stannis searched for a solution. Should he—should he leave and try to find someone? Or should he wait here until someone came? He eyed the girl, and contemplated picking her up and taking her to Myra, but the _last thing_ he needed was someone to see him holding her and assume the worst.

He was distracted from his thoughts when she began to twist. The child placed her palms against the ground and slowly, carefully, pushed herself up until she was standing. She wobbled slightly, and
pitched forward! Stannis instinctively jerked his arms toward her, but Daenerys caught herself on her hands, legs still firmly on the ground, and paused in that position as if to gather her resolve. Then, glancing determined up at him, she pursed her tiny pink lips and tried again.

Ridiculously, Stannis felt his heart pounding. *Seven hells, she makes standing seem as if it’s the most difficult endeavour ever achieved.* Then, immediately following, he thought *Yes, that’s it, just a bit more. You can do it!*

And finally, she did. Stannis exhaled in relief when she achieved a fully vertical orientation.

She looked tired; he *felt* tired—and he’d only *watched.* She smiled at him, almost *smug,* and he couldn’t help it as his own lips curled in return.

Then Stannis frowned, shaking his head. *What in the hells am I doing?*

But it seemed the girl wasn’t done yet, because she began to carefully walk towards him, testing each action as if memorizing the particular mechanics of movement. He eyed her as she slowly made her way to him, still crouched so he was at her level. Then, just when the tiny child was nearly to him, she tripped.

Like lightning, Stannis hands shot out and caught her around the waist. She looked at his hands, then up at his face, and *beamed.* Stannis felt his chest clench uncomfortably tight.

“This blessed gods,” a voice whispered, and suddenly Stannis remembered just where he was. He jerked his hands away and looked up almost guiltily, like a child caught being disobedient. Behind Daenerys stood Myra, eyes wide and a hand covering her mouth.

Then Stannis remember just how he came to be in this predicament, and made to stand and confront the woman for her negligence! But he jerked to a halt when Daenerys grabbed him, tiny hand only able to wrap around his index finger. She raised her arms towards him, and waited expectantly to be lifted. Getting the notion that he was being ordered around by an infant, Stannis nevertheless carefully grasped her around the waist and stood, holding her at arms length. Daenerys frowned and squirmed; obviously, this isn’t what she’d had in mind. She eyed him petulantly, lips pursed in displeasure.

Stannis had never been more uncomfortable in his *life.*

Myra gave a startled laugh, and Stannis realized he’d again forgotten himself. He scowled at her. “This is unacceptable,” he scolded. “Allowing the child to just walk freely through the Keep. There are stairs here taller than she is! What if she’d stumbled and hurt herself, woman?”

Myra’s eyes began to water, and tears fell down her cheeks. Stannis immediately regretted his tone, but *seven hells,* she *should* be more careful. He opened his mouth, trying to find the words to halt the unseemly display, and faltered. The baffling creature stretched her red lips into a huge smile, teeth showing unabashedly. She laughed and cried at the same time, running forward to snatch Daenerys out of his grasp and showered the squirming girl’s face with kisses.

Stannis stood there, convinced that he would never comprehend the woman. Laughing and crying at the same time! “What in the world are you doing? This is a serious matter.”

Myra smiled at him, holding Daenerys close. “Yes, my Lord. I do understand, and I will be more careful, but—” she released a delighted laugh—“I am simply too overcome at the moment! What a magnificent day it is. If only,” she signed, bittersweet. “If only her Grace was here to take joy in this glorious moment. She would have been so pleased, my Lord. I can just imagine the brilliance of her
Oblivious to the thoroughly confused Stannis, Myra gazed lovingly at the baby girl, who looked to be falling asleep. “Your mama would have been so proud of you, my love.”

“I do not—understand,” he stumbled, brows furrowed.

She looked at him, smiling softly, sea-blue eyes glistening, and Stannis involuntarily through that she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. Ruthlessly, he banished the thought. Control yourself, Baratheon!

“I did not leave her alone, My Lord,” she explained gently. “I put her down for a nap, and then sat before the hearth to stitch. As I do every day. But when I looked up,” she laughed, “the bed was empty! Oh, but you cannot imagine my horror. I felt as if someone had hit me over the head; that’s how thoroughly shocked I was!”

Well, she sure didn’t sound like it.

“I rushed out the door as soon as I noticed it ajar, mind whirling in a million horrible possibilities. I was convinced she had somehow been stolen away! And then—and then I rounded the corner to see my adventurous little princess walking towards you. Walking, my Lord.”

She grinned up at him, and Stannis began to comprehend. His chest again experienced that uncomfortable tightness, and he looked down at the now sleeping girl.

Gently, as if knowing that Stannis was vulnerable at that moment, Myra said, “Her very first steps, My Lord—and she goes directly to you.”
Chapter Summary

Daenerys explores her home, Stannis resigns himself to marriage, and the Storm is finally calmed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Over the next month, Stannis gained a tiny shadow. Now that the Daenerys had learned to walk, she deemed following Stannis around as he saw to matters within the Keep as an appropriate use of her time. Myra found this endlessly amusing, and would patiently follow behind the girl as she explored her new home. When in counsel with Davos and Cressen, Stannis found that the child was a much more compelling sight than matters of food storage, defence, and inter-house relations. Davos had taken to bringing tiny sweet cups of milk for the girl, while Cressen would endlessly go on about how her early ability to walk foreshadowed a brilliant mind.

This was ridiculous, of course; Robert had taken to walking much earlier than Stannis, but no one would ever say the man was more intelligent. Stannis kept this fact to himself, of course—because he was intelligent. Overall, they were getting very little work done, but he seemed to be the only one to protest.

“They’re only this age for a few short instances, My Lord,” Davos had said, fondly thinking of his own children. “The word is a new, wonderful place. It’s a glorious sight to see.”

Stannis found himself frequently late to appointments, because the child refused to simply be carried places. He must then walk very slowly, and stop often if she tired. He could no longer even be cold and scathing when he reprimanded his men or ordered the constriction of a new forge, because Daenerys would look wary, and Myra would give him a reproving look. Furthermore, it was damned difficult to appear properly intimidating with a small child beside him, and his people had taken to looking between the two of them rather than listening to Stannis!

The only good thing that came about from it was that the highborn nuisances at court had taken note of the behaviour, and it had finally proved to them that Stannis was not mistreating the child. Slowly, they’d begun to comply more willingly, but there was still a good amount of distrust and resentment amongst them. Apparently, a tiny Targaryen with silvery hair and violet eyes couldn’t fix everything.

Finally, when the behaviour had truly begun to impede the running of the house, he’d had to lower himself and compromise. One simply couldn’t be a Lord and have her with him at all hours, and he was reluctant to simply order Myra to stay away. As inconvenient as Daenerys’ presence was, he found that he didn’t mind how interested she was in him. And he took curiosity, rather than the ability to walk, as a true sign of a keen mind. Thus, Stannis now found himself spending two hours, one in the morning and one in the evening, sitting beside Myra and watching Daenerys explore Aegon’s Garden, with its towering trees and blooming roses and cranberry bushes. Sunshine was apparently good for children, although Stannis had spent most of his childhood indoors alone and he’d turned out fine.
He was expected to be in awe of whatever small treasure she found, be it a leaf, a flower, or, once, a brightly colored insect. Myra cooed over everything and applauded her endlessly, and Stannis was slowly becoming more accustomed to his newfound responsibility to praise her, though he did it much more briskly than the nurse. He didn’t think this was the proper way to raise a hightborn female, but he supposed Myra would know better than he. He also had no idea if other lords spend nearly this much time with their children, especially their female ones, let alone with their wards. Nevertheless, Stannis didn’t generally concern himself with what others thought to be appropriate behaviour, or he’d have turned out like Robert.

He was spending quite a bit more time with the nurse than was proper, he knew. And despite whatever attraction Stannis felt towards her, he believed that desires of that sort should be met only with one’s wife, to avoid future complications. Although it would be a lot easier to remember that if the woman didn’t smile at him so often, as if she genuinely liked him. If she didn’t constantly engage him in conversation, and look at him with this hopeful look that he couldn’t quite meet. He couldn’t allow himself to get any closer, or else he’d be unable to forget her once he married.

I’ve never before resented being hightborn, he thought. If I didn’t have all of these responsibilities—he looked to Daenerys, playing in the grass—I could wed whomever I wished.

And if was he’d been a different man, perhaps he could stomach wedding some woman, and keeping Myra with him—but that had never been Stannis. Robert’s opposite, in every way.

Which brought him to current matters; greeting the lady Dyrnia Velaryon, her two ladies’ maids, and four personal guards. He sat upon his throne, surrounded by the various lords, ladies, and knights sworn to his house, as the herald announced her.

This may be my future wife, Stannis thought, studying the beautiful young girl that curtseyed deeply before him. She was dressed in the pale turquoise of her House, which he admitted suited her blue eyes and pale, plaited golden hair. “Dyrnia of House Velaryon greets you, my Lord, and offers wishes of goodwill to the Lord of Dragonstone on behalf of my Lord Father.” She smiled demurely, eyes lowered, and he was reminded of the guileless yet calculating women he’d come to know at Storm’s End.

Yes, this is what a hightborn female is like. They do not show their teeth when they smile, or tickle baby girls. Or gently tease him when he is bemused by the affections of said baby girl. Reluctantly, Stannis decided that the woman before him would do. Now, to ensure she could properly care for Daenerys before he wrote to her father with his proposal.

“Rise, my lady,” he responded coolly, face grim. “I, Stannis of House Baratheon of Dragonstone, thank you for journeying here to provide a ladies’ education to my ward, Daenerys of House Targaryen. I trust the waters were pleasant,” he added on, as an afterthought. Davos always said he must be more pleasant in conversation, though Stannis thought it an annoying waste of time. This was to be his wife, however, and he supposed the effort was warranted.

“Yes, my lord. Thank you for your concern, my Lord. The journey was pleasant, and, as you surely know, my Lord Father’s ships are swiftest in all of Westeros. He will be honored to provide House Baratheon of Dragonstone with a few vessels for your fleet, as a gift of goodwill and prosperity between our Houses.”

Stannis frowned; that was unusually generous. Perhaps Lord Monford’s thinking was aligned to Stannis’s own, and he too sought marriage between Stannis and his daughter. It would make this easier, and certainly explain the man’s unusual benevolence. He did not know if he was entirely
comfortable with how easy the man had turned his back upon the Targaryen’s, however.

“That is very generous,” he said, eyes narrowed. “And what does your Lord Father desire in return?”

For a instance, her mask slipped, and surprise bled through. At that moment, she seemed familiar to him, but he could not say why. Then she expertly covered it by lowering her lashes, “Nothing my Lord, Father simply wishes to thank you for all you have done for House Velaryon.”

Stannis frowned. He was getting the feeling that he’d done something for these people that he was unaware of. He searched his mind, but could not remember any past dealing with the Targaryen loyalists.

He was aware of Cressen and Davos glancing at him, the former frowning and the later in concern. What did he not know?

Myra arrived at that moment, with Daenerys in her arms, and his breath left him.

She was dressed like a lady. He’d never before seen her in full formal wear—did not know she even owned any gowns—nor with her hair intricately plaited and lined with deep blue ribbons. She came before his thrones and curtsied with expert grace, smile cool and practised. In her arms, Daeyners, squirmed, and looked at Dyrnia in bemusement, pointed, and questioned “Rah?”

And Stannis Baratheon suddenly felt like the biggest fool in the seven kingdoms. Seven hells, you idiot, he thought, realization dawning. Myra was handmaiden to the queen! She spoke with an excellent, graceful cadence, said ‘My Lord, rather than ‘milord,’ and not only that, but she was perfectly comfortable conversing with Stannis, as if she was used to it! She was highborn!

Stannis had a crisis of realization, horrified at how ridiculous he’d been this past year, at how rude and improper he’d acted towards a highborn woman. Bloody hells…And all because he’d been trying to avoid developing further affection for this woman; who dared plead to a King before his Court to spare the life of a child.

Myra turned to the woman beside her, their faces nearly identically, and kissed her sweetly on the forehead. “Little sister, how I have missed you. How are Mother and Father? And our brothers? Have they grown?”

Dyrnia laughed, delighted, and responded that all was well. Then she looked to Daenerys and cooed over the child, calling her the most beautiful baby she’d ever seen. “You have done well, sister, you have done our House proud.”

“But! But you feed her! How can you be highborn!” Stannis exclaimed, a last desperate protest, and was immediately appalled with himself. The whole court turned to him in shock, silent. Cressen equally aghast at his Lord’s words, while Davos looked to him with widening understanding. They’d all know…only I’ve been a fool.

Myra gazed at him, wide eyed, and then slowly realization dawned. “You didn’t know,” she breathed. “I had wondered, this past month especially. I just thought—” she cut herself off, shaking her head. “But how…? How could you possibly…” She narrowed her eyes, and suddenly passed Daenerys into her sister’s arms.

Hands lifting her skirts, she strode forward, climbing the steps to the throne and ignoring the riveted eyes of the court. Stannis sprang to his feet, wary and feeling as if he need protection, but his bloody guards just let her pass right through! “No, no! I know how, you frustrating man!” she raged, stopping before him with her hands on her hips. “If its not castles and defences and armor and
agriculture, you pay no attention at all! Seven hells, but you are the most maddening person I have ever met! I demand an apology, Stannis Baratheon! For making me think you were playing with me! For making me think I was imagining things!"

She paused, waited, and glared, “Well!”

Stannis his mouth, and what came out was, “Marry me.”

“What?” she asked, eyes widening, but he didn’t know with what emotion. His damn heart was beating too fast!

“Marry me,” he hesitated, clearing his throat “I think we would suit, and, and I am a Lord, and you’ll be Lady of Dragonstone, and I—I think your father approves already. You already know the castle, and servants, and you already sleep in the Lady’s rooms, so…and you’ll be close to your home, and Daenerys is here—”

He ended broke off with a curse. It was the most feeble argument Stannis had given in his life. He was so bloody embarrassed he thought he’d faint, and then the court truly would never respect him again! Bloody hells, what had happened to him! A year ago he’d been comfortable, with his rules and his principles, and now he was this ridiculous man who yielded to a child and made a fool of himself before his court! Gods, the whole realm would know soon…

She tilted her head, eyes narrowed upon his pathetic self. “And?”

“And…?”

She huffed, “And will this be a marriage of convenience, because I fit your requirements and already sleep in the Lady’s room?” she mocked, scowling.

Stannis swallowed. “No,” he said, just for her ears alone. “It would—it would please me…if you were my wife. Only you.”

She stared at him and slowly softened, a smile spreading her lips. “Yes, you idiot,” she whispered. “I don’t know where you’d end up if I don’t. Probably brainwashed into some mad cult doing stupid, stupid things.”

Now that was a bit insulting; Stannis was not such a gullible man. But…well, she’d agreed, so what did an alternate future really matter?

Davos stepped forward, clearing his throat, and breaking their stare. “Congratulations are in order, My Lord, My Lady. I believe now would be a good time to adjourn court so we may—acclimate ourselves to resent events.”

Stannis would kill Davos for the amusement in his tone, he decided.

Filled with dread, wondering how badly he’d shamed himself before the court, Stannis took a deep breath and grimly surveyed his people. But unlike what he’d expected, there wasn’t derision or disgust on their faces; most—women especially, he noted with unease—looked like they were positively beaming. The amusement was gentle rather than mocking, and he got the feeling that he’d finally done something right for these strange people.

“They’ve had to stomach the Mad King, and all his evil, for many years,” Myra explained gently. “Now, another fool sits upon the throne—” She ignored his reproving look. “—and they haven’t, we haven’t—felt truly secure for a long, long time. But you will make them safe. You finally proved yourself, Stannis, proved that you are not just a brilliant, cold Lord, but a man. The blood of Valyria
is passionate—and a Lord must be able to understand his people. Fear grants a brittle power, and that Lord is never safe. Respect, however?” She grinned. “That endures.”

In Dyrnia’s arms, Daenerys giggled.

And for the first time, Stannis felt that perhaps he’d found his place.

Chapter End Notes

I don't usually make notes, cause I feel the writing should speak for itself, but this was a very important, pivotal chapter.

I originally planned to wed Stannis to Selyse, like in canon, but the way this developed and what I have planned tells me that she wouldn't be a proper fit. Much of this plot hinges on Stannis making vary different choices, and in order to do that, he can't grow up into the cold, lonely, desperate-for-a-purpose man that I believe he is like in-canon. The only reason Melidandre was able to get her claws into him was because he'd been desperate for any affection, any 'calling' for years, having begun with the neglect of his brother and family. Plus, Selyse was not a woman with which one may have a healthy relationship. Stannis needed someone to challenge him, and to not fear him.

So while he may seems to be out-of-charter in this chapter, I'd dispute that he's not, because the Stannis we know in canon (and often hate, because of what he did to Shireen), had very different life experiences.

As for the romance with Myra and the 'sudden revelation' that she's a Lady; i'd dispute that as well. There were many clues of her birth, starting with her presence by the queen: a spot occupied by highborn women. Stannis was oblivious because he chose to be, because he wanted her but couldn't let himself give in, because he had responsibilities and his marriage would have been important in fulfilling those responsibilities. And the way he first met her, and her actions in court, were so different from his conception of a highborn woman, that he ignored the other signs.

And, honestly, I just like happy family feels, especially when this fic will get darker as Dany ages.

Anyways, tell me what you think. :)
Bastard's Lesson

Chapter Summary

Stannis makes a decision; Daenerys gives advice; and Jon learns a lesson.

Chapter Notes

Phew, test done and I'm back. If anyone knows or has taken the GRE, kudos to you, it's evil.

Also, I want to show everyone this amazing fan art by Queen_Tyna_Maria, which she did of Myra, and it is beautiful and perfect! Thank you so much!

https://korrontea.deviantart.com/art/Myra-706854340?ga_submit_new=10%3A1506629974&ga_type=edit&ga_changes=1&ga_recent=1

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I find that my people often need to be reassured that their Lord cares about them, and not just the holdings they keep. I’m sure there’s not much difference in the South. Try to talk to them, Stannis. Small things, about their lives and the lives of their families. Ask them about their small concerns, small problems, and try to solve them if they ask for your opinion. Only if they ask, however—some people simply wish to share their burdens, not be told by a stranger on how to handle them. You’ll be shaking your head or scoffing at this point, I am sure, but think of it this way: their families are important to them, they see their happiness and well being as their responsibility—which by extension makes them your responsibility. Asking after them will not only fulfil that duty, but will also show your people that they matter to you—a two benefit, one cost strategic move. Show that their lives are important you, and your life shall become important to them. An exchange of services, if you will.

Now, regarding business, the architects you sent have evaluated the lands. Benjen tells me that the swamp’s odor is as unpleasant as expected. However, Howland Reed, Lord of House Reed and the Greywater Watch, has promised a solution. Apparently, the crannogmen have allowed the swamp to attain its current state so as to discourage new residents until “such a time comes when the Moat is needed.” When questioned about this miraculous solution, Howland simply wrote “fish and flow”. They’re a mysterious people, the crannogmen; even here in the North we cannot say we understand them. Still, they know their lands, so I trust them in this matter. Furthermore, Lord Reed is a personal friend, and he’ll ensure that everything goes smoothly. Most of the remaining keep must be torn down to make room for the new plans, but the land is stable and large enough to accommodate them. The construction will take years and may not be accomplished in time for the wedding, so we’ll have to plan accordingly.

The Northern lords were resistant to the location, and especially to the Essosie architects amongst the party you sent. Many would prefer the Gift or perhaps the deserted lands along the western shore, but I know your feelings about those places. Thankfully, Howland’s support stayed much of
the growing dissatisfaction, and now the idea that our children will essentially be protecting the North has grown in popularity. It also doesn’t hurt that you’re funding much of the construction—although some are taking that as a challenge to contribute more than needed. Northmen and their pride.

Jon’s lessons are going well. We’re taking care in teaching him High Valyrian—but he’s not very enamoured with languages, unfortunately. Nevertheless, he knows his duty. He’ll begin practicing with a sword and bow soon—and for those he is excited. The boy definitely has Stark blood within him.

Until next time,

Ned Stark

Stannis Baratheon sighed, flicking the letter away and pressing down upon his temple to halt the headache. Despite the growing contentment amongst his people, begun when he’d wed Myra and carefully cultivated since, there was still a distance between the Lord and those pledged to him. Oh, they didn’t disobey him or purposefully antagonize him anymore, but Stannis found himself discontent nonetheless. Myra’s advice—to allow things to grow naturally—while appreciated, didn’t seem to be working. Besides, a woman who’d grown up around these people and was intuitively comfortable in her role couldn’t fully understand Stannis’s struggle. He’d finally, begrudgingly, asked Stark’s opinion on the matter. The man was a bleeding heart if Stannis ever saw one, and all reports said he was loved amongst his people. Stannis had carefully enquired into the matter in his last letter, hiding his real reasons for asking, but the damned man was getting to know Stannis too well!

He grimaced in annoyance. He was getting too close, too informal with the Northern Lord. He wasn’t entirely sure he liked it. Not when the man was Robert’s friend, and a younger Stannis had never had good experiences with men in that particular category. Still, he unwillingly admitted, at least the advice was something he could actively apply, which appealed to him more than his wife’s more passive had recommended.

That matter aside, Stannis focused on the other contents. Finally, construction on the castle could truly begin. After nearly three years of planning, researching, preparation, and gathering talented architects from the kingdoms and Essos, things could be put into motion. Well, he amended, glaring down at the one of three wooden miniatures on his desk; as soon as he finally figured out where to put the blasted glassgarden! He picked up a small wooden dome—the only one piece without a home, and eyed in with a frown.

Winterfell had hot springs to keep the ground warm, and thus the glassgarden there didn’t need so much direct contact with the sun. Moat Cailin, while farther south, wasn’t warm enough to support agriculture if the Keep’s walls blocked out the sun. But how to ensure it was still defensible and within the walls?

His thoughts were interrupted by the door being pushed open, and a small silver head woven with yellow ribbons appeared. Four-year-old Daenerys paused in surprise, but looked over her shoulder before scurrying inside with a smile. She pushed the heavy door closed—needing her entire body to do so, he noted with amusement.

“Cousin!” she beamed, delighted, and then skipped towards him. Stannis felt his face soften. She lifted her arms, as was her habit, and he obligingly picked the girl up and deposited her on his lap. She twinned her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, pushing away.
He raised an eyebrow, wondering how she knew that he was usually in council at this time, and made a look of glancing around. “This is my office, last I recall. The better question is what is a girl who should be napping right now doing here?” He eyed her yellow nightgown pointedly.

She smiled, a tiny bit sheepish. “A walk?”

He squinted at her, unimpressed. “Really. And what does Myra think of this…walk?”

She blinked, and made a show of looking around. “I don’t know,” she responded, tone saying it was obvious and he was an idiot. “She’s not here.”

Gods help her future husband.

“All right, Daenerys, tell me the truth, what did—”

“Daenerys Stormborn, when I find you I swear I will make you stay indoors and recite High Valyrian for an entire week!” His wife’s shill voice resonated from the hallway, sounding as if it was rapidly approaching. And in her current state, such movement was difficult, so Stannis knew she was very angry indeed.

The aforementioned doomed girl’s eyes widened comically from her place on his lap. “But that’s not fair!”

She squirmed off his lap and disappeared down between his legs. He squinted at her as she crouched under the large desk, finger over her lips and looking at him pleadingly. Stannis slowly came to the realization that he’d just discovered a common hiding spot. He signed.

“Do I have to make you come to the privy with me, from now on! Do I!” Myra questioned, just outside the door. She slammed the door open, “Because I will—Stannis!”

At his wife’s gasping surprise, he simply couldn’t help himself.

“Well,” he responded dryly, leaning back. “While the duties of a husband are ever evolving, wife, I can assure you, accompaniment to the privy will never be one of them. It’s for the survival of our marriage, you understand.”

A tiny giggle, quickly halted, came from under the desk.

Myra’s faced blushed a deep crimson, but her eyes narrowed at the desk. Hair lose, and also dressed in a nightgown—this one of blue satin—stomach large underneath it, Myra made a beautiful sight. His heart still ached whenever he gazed upon her.

“I gather you’re looking for an escaped prisoner?”

She glared at him, blush fading. “A nap is not a prison sentence, no matter how much Daenerys says it is! A four-year-old needs sleep—as does an impending mother. But gods, getting her to lay down is the most challenging part of my day.” She shook her head, exasperated, but there was amusement there. “I turn away for one moment and she’s gone, every time! I haven’t managed to find all her hiding places yet.” A pause. “Sometimes,” she continued guiltily, “I just give up and sleep. But she’s always back when I wake up!”

She pointed suspiciously at the large piece of furniture in front of him. ‘Is she under the desk?’ Myra mouthed. He gave a barely perceptible nod, knowing small violet eyes were watching him carefully. Myra huffed and rolled her eyes.
Stannis frowned, “Are you sure you’d rather not hire a nurse? You should be resting at this stage; Cressen says the babe could come any day now.”

A small gasp from under the desk. Myra pretended she didn’t hear.

She sneered, “Like I’d let some stranger raise Daenerys. No, I will take care of her and our children myself.”

Stannis gave up; this was always a touchy subject for his wife. He got the feeling she hadn’t had the best experiences in childhood, but Myra was a private woman, and she always told him personal matters slowly. He understood; he hadn’t told her all about his childhood yet either: what she did know made her angry and hateful towards Robert—an attitude that he couldn’t allow her to foster lest it came out one day before the king.

*Although I secretly love how protective she is…*

Stannis hadn’t seen his brother since that day at the feast, and the king had sent Jon Arryn, his Hand, in his place for Stannis’s wedding. He’d been thankful: things were finally smoothing between him and his lords, and he didn’t need Robert’s presence at the wedding to ruin things with Myra and with the men who’d finally begun to differentiate the brothers.

“What about Dyrnia? She’d be happy to come here for a few weeks.”

She shook her head, “My sister has her own household to run now. She’s expecting as well,” she smiled, pleased with the news.

“My congratulations,” he said automatically. He was quite please, as he’d found the girl to share many characteristics with his wife. It made him wonder how many highborn women from his childhood he’d simply written off as aloof or simple due to their practiced courtly manners.

*I need to work on that.*

Dyrnia had married into House Sunglass, to the eldest son of Lord Guncer. The marriage had occurred to reaffirm the bond between the two crownland Houses. Sunglass, a deeply pious house, had given Stannis three galleys for his fleet. The number of ships under his rule were quickly increasing, and they now had warships, trading ships, fishing ships, and travel ships which ferried passengers around Westeros and across the Narrow Sea. With the willing help of the lords and knights and their contributions to the mining effort, precious stones, minerals, fish, and transport were quickly making Dragonstone rich. Soon he hoped to acquire a Master smith to see what he could do with the mysterious metal they’d recently found in the southern mines. So far, the orange and red stone was proving difficult to smelt.

*It’s too light to be useful for armor, my Lord. But perhaps cookware for the small folk?* Or so the blacksmith said.

“Is that another Letter from Lord Stark?” Myra asked, slowly sitting herself. “Did you finally decide on a location, then?”

He nodded towards the central miniature, “Moat Cailin.”

She wrinkled her nose. “The swamp? Really, Stannis, couldn’t you find a better place? Sending a princess to a smelly swamp!”

“Swamp?” questioned a tiny voice under the table, sounding as if she were also wrinkling her nose.
He sighed. “It was between it, the Gift, and Sea Dragon Point. All locations had their downsides, but this one had the least. Besides, apparently House Reed knows how to take care of the smell: it seems to have been purposeful, rather than natural occurrence.”

Myra continued frowning, “What about that river you told me about? Fever river? I don’t like Daenerys near such a place.”

“Another purposeful ruse, apparently; these crannogmen like visitors even less that I do. Who knows how far they’ve gone to maintain their soul dominion over the Neck?”

She apparently didn’t like that he had an answer for everything, but Moat Cailin, to Stannis, was simply the best choice. Like he’d trust Ned’s bastard to grow up able to properly defend a keep! No, the boy needed all the advantage he could, and Stannis would ensure no army would every be able to threaten Deanery’s home and drive her to starvation and desperation. That no man would ever have the small girl hiding under the desk at his mercy because her home couldn’t defend her.

The Gift and Sea Dragon point were much too dangerous; plagued by those scoundrels of the Night’s Watch and the savages beyond the Wall, and the pillaging rapists of the Iron Islands. He’d read the histories of the North and these ridiculous ‘King’s-Beyond-The-Wall’; no way was his ward going to be the first line of defence against them! And there was a reason so much of the western shore of the North was empty, with those fucking pirates roaming the sea.

“In the Moat, they’ll be able to escape no matter which side seeks to attack them. Besides, White Harbor is a few days’ ride away; we—I mean, you,” he cleared his throat awkwardly “will be able to visit her as often as you desire.”

An amused light of understanding filled her eyes, and he cursed internally. “Ah, I see. Yes, of course, I will certainly wish to visit her often. All by myself, of course, for my lord husband will simply be too busy with his duties.” She reached across the and patted his hand mockingly, “Don’t worry Stannis, my love, I wont force you to come and visit Daenerys with me.”

An offended gasp from under the table! A small fist hit his leg in retaliation.

“Damn it, woman, you know I’ll be joining you whenever you go!” he hissed, “Yes, alright, the ease of which we can arrive there was a major part of my consideration, are you happy!”

An apologetic pat on his leg.

She leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips, and he quickly gave in as he always did.

Another giggle under the table, and he pulled away quickly. Myra grinned and sat back.

“It may not even happen,” he admitted with a sigh. “I can’t figure out where to place the glasshouse. It must be large enough to feed the whole castle, yet always bathed by sunlight. There’s simply not enough space.”

Daenerys gave up on hiding and popped her head up. “Castle?” she looked at Stannis, crawling upon his lap. “My castle?”

“No, it will belong to your husband,” he corrected automatically.

“No! Myra hissed. His eyes widened in confusion. Bloody hells, it was the truth!

Daenerys squinted at him. “If he’ll by my husband, then it’ll be my castle,” she explained slowly, rolling her eyes. Again, like Stannis was the idiot.
Yes, Gods help you, Jon Snow.

“That’s exactly right, my love,” Myra cooed. Stannis eyed her, not sure he was comfortable with the things she seemed to be teaching Daenerys.

“Is that my castle?” she asked, pointing at the miniature of Moat Cailin. He nodded. She frowned, and looked back at him “It’s very small.”

Myra laughed. “That’s just a miniature, my love. The real one is bigger.”

“Oh,” she nodded. “What’s a ‘swamp’? Why’s it bad and why is my castle on it?”

Bloody hells, but this girl was too intelligent for her own good. “Do not concern yourself with it. I’ll take care of everything and there won’t be anything ‘bad’ about it. Well…as long as I can figure out what to do with this.” He showed them the tiny dome.

“It needs to be in the sun, because all the food will be grown in it,” he explained. Daenerys snatched the wooden figure from his grasp and studied it, then the castle.

She placed the dome right over the main Keep, in the center of the castle and high above the walls, and nodded. “There. Now it’s in the sun!”

Stannis gapped, then shook his head in denial. “No-no you don’t understand. It must be on the ground, in the soil. Plants grow in soil.”

“Well, soil doesn’t have to be on the ground,” Myra said slowly, eyeing the castle critically. She met his eyes, mind whirling behind her beautiful blue eyes. “You’ve been meaning to form an alliance with the Reach. My brother Jaekerys is of age now. He’ll need a wife soon. Write to Lord Tyrell with the offer, and he can surely find an unwed daughter amongst his lords. As part of her dowry, you could ask for soil from the Reach. If no daughters are available, there are surly other things they lack that we could provide. Then you can simply build the glasshouse atop the Keep and line it with soil from the Reach. It would be plenty of space, and the soil will be rich.”

Excited now, ignoring his wide, shocked eyes, she continued “The stairs into the garden could directly into the kitchens, and you could even install one of those clever pulley systems to send the food down easily. That way, there will also be more room on the ground to raise livestock!”

Stannis, speechless, gazed between his beautiful wife and his clever ward. Both were gazing upon his expectantly. He released a breathless laugh. “Well my dears, it seems we’ve finalized the plans. It will be the most unique castle in Westeros!”

Daenerys grinned wider, nearly bouncing in his lap. Stannis met Myra’s eyes, telling her how much he admired her with her eyes alone. He couldn’t wait until the babe came and he could spend some personal time with his wife. She smirked at him knowingly.

Then Myra turned to Daenerys, “Now, my love, I believe I said something about a reciting High Valyrian?”

Daenerys immediately wilted, and turned to Stannis with begging eyes. He felt himself unwillingly yielding, “Myra, perhaps—”

He broke off in response to her glare, then shrugged at Daenerys, who in turn gawked at him in utmost betrayal. Bloody hells, these two would be the death of him!

“Now, come, my love, it’s time—”
Myra broke of with a pained gasp, and grasped her middle.

“Myra!” he asked, standing worriedly with a shocked Daenerys in his arms.

“Stannis! Stannis, get Cressen! I—I think the baby’s coming!”

Daenery gasped. “What?” She pointed at Myra’s stomach. “But how will it get out!”

“Stannis, bloody hells, get me to my room and get Cressen!”

****

Daenerys was only four, so she didn’t understand what was happening, or why Myra was shouting so much. She sat outside the room, beside her cousin Stannis who looked scary but was actually very nice.

If a bit dumb sometimes, but Myra told him all boys were kind of dumb. You just had to know how to manage them.

People keep trying to get Daenerys to leave, but she wanted to see the baby—even if she had no idea where it was coming from.

Stannis stepped out of the room a few minutes after he’d pushed inside, and Daenerys heard Myra shouting again, words angry and screaming. The princess had never heard her cousin sound like that, and she looked wide eyes at the pale Stannis.

He slumped down beside her, despite how he usually said a Lord had to sit straight.

“You should apologize,” Daenerys informed him.

He blinked at her in bewilderment. “What?”

“I don’t know what a ‘cock’ is,” she explained soberly. “But whatever you did with it must have been horrible if Myra wants to rip it off and beat you with it.” She nodded at his gaping, wide mouthed horror—squinting at the guards at the door, who’d begun to cough strangely—and concluded. “So, you should apologize.”

Stannis stared at her for many seconds, and Daenerys wondered if she’d said something wrong. Then her somber cousin exploded into laughter, grabbing her and holding her close. He would stop, then start again helplessly, and the guards kept coughing.

Myra was right; boys were dumb.

Finally, the doors finally opened and Cressen came out, looking exhausted but happy.

“My lord. Would you like to meet your son?”

****

Jon was only five, and he didn’t know much, but he did know at least three things for sure. One, he was the son of Eddard Stark. Two, he was going to marry Daenerys Targaryen when he grew up—he didn’t know why, or why people called her a ‘princess who was not a princess,’ but he figured he’d understand later. And three, Robb and the newly born Sansa were his brother and sister.
What he didn’t understand was who Lady Catelyn was. Robb called her ‘mother’ and she called him ‘son’ and other nice things and would kiss him a lot. She was also almost always holding the constantly crying Sansa, and would say things like ‘mama loves you, my sweet’ to her. But Lady Catelyn never said nice things to Jon; she never said anything to him at all.

But she would always look at him with a scowl, so he was too scared to ask her why.

Jon didn’t understand. He was the same age as Robb, so didn’t that mean she was his mother, too? All the children in Winterfell had one mother and one father—so if Ned was his father, then Catelyn was obviously his mother. So why was she so…mean to him?

Maybe he’d done something to her, when he was really little and couldn’t remember. Maybe he’d bitten her or wouldn’t stop crying, and she was mad because he hadn’t said sorry. Although he didn’t know why she wanted him to apologise from something he’d done when he was too little to know better—it’s not like she got mad at Sansa for crying all the time! Maybe—he touched his dark hair, and then looked curiously at Robb’s red hair—maybe she didn’t like him because he didn’t look like her—didn’t have red hair like Robb or Sansa.

But that didn’t make sense either, because she seemed to like Ned a lot, and Jon looked just like him! Or maybe she pretended to like Ned because he was her husband and she had to?

One day, when she came to get Robb from the Maester, after he and Jon finished their lessons for the day—yuck, High Valyrian—Jon decided to be brave and ask her. Maybe if he knew what he’d done, he could say sorry and then she’d kiss him like she did Robb or say nice things like she did to Sansa.

Only his father and Uncle Benjen ever said nice things to Jon, and the first was always busy and the second was away right now.

Jon thought it would be really nice if Lady Catelyn would say nice things to him, too.

So, when she picked up Robb and turned to leave, giving Jon only a cold glare, the little boy bravely sprang after her and grabbed her hand. “Um, M-Mother, I—"

Lady Catelyn snatched her arm away and whipped around, a horrible look of rage and hatred on her face.

“I am not your Mother, you little bastard,” she spat. “Do not ever call me that again!”

Then she turned and strode away, and he met Robb’s wide eyes over her shoulder. Maester Luwin kept his backed turned as the five-year old stood there, trembling. Jon never told anyone about that day, and no one mentioned it again.

That night, and many nights after, Jon Snow cried himself to sleep.

It was the first time he realized that he was different.

Chapter End Notes

So, um...
This is what my Moat Cailin will look like.....
https://magicmoon111.deviantart.com/art/Moat-Cailin-707263239?
ga_submit_new=10%3A1506824688

...happy crying?
Daenerys overhears a story, Stannis wins a battle, and Myra looks to the future.

“Is it true that she’s becoming like the Mad King?” Reena, one of the kitchen maids, whispered quietly. “Daeno said—”

“Hush, you stupid girl!” The cook, Griffa, hissed. “Don’t let no one hear you talkin’ ‘bout such a thing. If the princess hears you and starts askin’ questions, it’ll be on all of our heads!”

Daenerys, who’d been sneaking into the kitchens to steal herself a treat before supper, paused. She was the princess! But the five year old had never heard of this ‘Mad King’ before. Were they talking about the man on the throne, who Myra really didn’t like, but who was also Stannis’s brother? Daenerys had never met the king, and no one ever talked about him, but if he was ‘mad’ she wasn’t sure she wanted to!

“Surely Lady Myra wouldn’t allow Lord Stannis to—” Reena began.

“It’s Lady Myra that you’d best be wary of, girl. The Lord don’t concern himself with matters inside the Keep. Didn’t you hear what happened to Lynese?”

Daenerys frowned; she wanted to know what happened to Lynese too! One day the mousy maid, who’d bring their food up to the solar, had disappeared, and Reena had been hired in her place. Myra had ensured Daenerys that the other girl had returned home to help her family. Did Myra lie?

“What!” Reena gasped. “But-But I though that was about stealing!”

The cook tsked, and walked farther away. Daenerys sneakily crawled after, keeping the large wooden kitchen table between her and the women. “No, the fool started runnin’ her mouth off—telling everybody ‘bout what she saw one morning, and how the princess was turning into her father. How ‘there’s a temper in that one, just like the Mad King’. Ridiculous, I say! That little girl’s sweeter than honey. One little tantrum don’t mean she’s goin’ mad! All children have tempers; Targaryen ones ‘specially’. It’s the dragon blood.”

The only incident Daenerys could remember that she’d been really mad was when she’d asked cousin Stannis for a silver horse, like in her storybooks, and he’d said no! She’d screamed at him and ran away, slamming the door. It had been during breakfast, she remembered. Had Lynese seen it?

But Daenerys hadn’t done anything wrong! He’d been unfair—she was old enough to learn to ride! Maester Cressen would tell her stories about the ‘Dothraki’ and how babies grew up on a horse. Daenerys was a big girl; if some Dothraki kid could ride so young, then so could she!

Myra made her apologize later, explaining that Daenerys had hurt cousin Stannis, and Daenerys did feel bad about that. She didn’t want to hurt anybody—Ever!

However, what was a more pressing concern at the moment was this ‘Mad King.’ The women seemed to be saying that that was her father! Daenerys knew she was a princess, which meant that her parents had been King and Queen. Myra always talked about her Mother, Rhaella, but she’d get
quiet when Daenerys asked about her father. Had he…had he been mad?

Is that why Myra didn’t tell her anything—why she always went quiet?

**Will I… will I go mad, too?**

“Lady Myra overheard her one time—drove her to right rage, it did. She had Lynese beaten and then dismissed her. Good riddance, I say!” Griffa spat. “We don’t need no gossips stirrin’ up trouble.”

**Beaten?** Daenerys was shocked. Myra hurt someone? **No, no—that’s impossible**, Daenerys assured herself. Myra was the nicest person ever.

“I had no idea,” Reena whispered, making Daenerys strain to listen. “I though Lord Stannis was the cruel one—not Lady Myra, too!”

Daenerys gasped silently in outrage! Stannis and Myra weren’t cruel! They were the **nicest people ever**!

“Oh, bah! Don’t be an idiot, girl. The Lord and Lady ain’t cruel—they only punish people who deserve it, who break the rules.” Daenerys nodded in support—Griffa knew what she was talking about! “We have it better than most, remember that. The Lord is fair, though he looks like he’s never smiled a day in his life—and Lady Myra would protect all of us if things turned badly. They’re good people, but they’ll always choose their children first—and that’s what the princess is to them. Remember that, and don’t be stupid enough to run your mouth off about her.”

Tirade over, Griffa sighed and turned away. Daenerys used that opportunity to sneak away. She had a lot to think about. As she was leaving, the last thing she heard was: “We don’t need the Usurper King hearin’ any rumours and decidin’ to come for her.”

**The king?** **Come for me?**

…**And what’s a ’Usurper’?**

She’d have to ask Maester Cressen.

*****

Stannis sat upon his throne, Myra beside him upon a smaller seat, and Davos stood a few rungs down with Cressen. The lords were in attendance, muttering amongst themselves at the news.

“He’s Grace, King Robet, First of His Name, has ordered me to marshal the fleet and join him in battle,” Stannis announced soberly. Myra’s mouth twisted in displeasure at his side, and Cressen sighed in despair. “We will prepare the ships within the week, and set sail for the Iron Islands.”

“My Lord,” a knight sworn to house Sunglass stepped forward. “The fleet has barely recovered form the Rebellion…perhaps it would be best to write the king and tell him we cannot do as he says at the moment. That we need more time to prepare.”

There were murmurs of agreement, but Stannis knew the real cause of their reluctance—they had no loyalty to Robert, and many probably hopped he’d die in battle. His heir, Prince Joffery, was still just a babe, and the Baratheon rule was new—if Robert died, taking back power from him was possible.

However, no matter Stannis’s personal feelings, he’d sworn an oath to the King, and his duty lay there. But he knew his people would resist such an argument.
“Varys, Robert’s Master of Whispers, knows exactly what our fleet is like, down to the very ship, and all know that we’ve had a prosperous few years, my lords. Should the King be victorious and find out of the duplicity, and our reluctance to heed a royal decree, he will sail here next.”

Stirrings of unease showed on the faces of crowed, and one man spat “Varys, that bloody traitor!”

“Varys is not a traitor!” Stannis was quick to refute, hands clenched. “He serves the king, my lords. He serves the crown. Take care with what you saw amongst so many ears!”

“Let them hear!” The Lord of House Massey decreed, his large frame speaking of mixed blood. His angry face bespoke of enflamed passion. “Why should you heed the call of a man who has ignored you! Let them come, I say! We can protect ourselves! You can protect us, My Lord!”

There were shouts of agreement, and Stannis, despite his pleasure at their loyalty, immediately surged to his feet. “Are you suggestion I commit treason, Lord Messay! Against my King; against my brother!”

The man turned away, as did many others. “He’s not our king,” someone muttered rebelliously, and Stannis glared in that direction, although he didn’t know who’d spoken. Bloody hells, but Robert was hated in the crownlands—in his main seat of power! And the reports of his whoring and drinking, that Stannis was getting with increased frequency, didn’t endear the man to anyone! It was becoming common knowledge that the king was a fool who ignored his responsibilities, and that the kingdoms were going to shit.

*The King would rather feast and fuck than rule,* he remembered hearing a Knight mutter snidely, months ago. *At least the Mad King could bloody do his job, before he went insane!*

That was ludicrous, of course. But loyalty to the Targaryens was ingrained in these people. They would ignore much, as long as it came from a man who donned a red dragon as his sigil.

“The King has disrespect us, disrespected you, for years,” Myra said quietly, but her voice resonated in the silent hall. All were watching, and he locked eyes with his wife. “Now he seeks to use you and take advantage of all you’ve struggled to attain. *This* is the man you call brother. The very man who threatened a baby girl with a fate worse than death, right before his court. The man who threatens her *still*. Perhaps its time, husband, to look for a new way.”

Somber nods surrounded him, and Davos was looking decidedly uncomfortable.

Stannis sat down with a weary sigh. Myra had never made her wishes—those spoken and those silent—unknown to him. But Stannis was not a man who could break his oath to the crown, to his family, unless he had no other choice. But how could he convince his people that this was the only way to protect themselves?

He looked at the gathered highborn gallery, who, despite himself, he’d come to genuinely care about. He wished to know how Lord Maron’s wife was fairing, after a difficult pregnancy; how Justin’s son was doing in the training yard; if Lord Aryon had resolves his concerns about his daughter marriage. He wished to ask Lady Dyrnia on the health of her young daughter; he was concerned whether the Lady Annya had recovered from her illness. Stannis had never cared before—but he couldn’t stop now.

“Yes, perhaps we could protect ourselves. Perhaps we wont need to, and the future will be a very different place after the Greyjoys are defeated.” He swept the attentive room. “But would you bet your wives on our victory—his eyes met Maron’s—or your children?” he looked to Justin, Aryon, and Dyrina. All looked away.
Then Stannis turned to his wife. “Would you risk Daenerys and Steffon’s futures on a gamble against the crown?”

Myra held his eyes, jaw clenched, but eventually looked away. He heard a quiet curse pass through her lips.

“One week, my lords, and we set sail. Begin preparations immediately.”

*****

Stannis, covered in grime, sweat, and blood, stood to the back of the gathered crowd as Robert forced Balon Greyjoy to his knees. Eddard Stark stood beside him, face aged and much more somber than Stannis remembered. He knew from their letters that the Northman was having familial difficulties. His younger brother Benjen was scathing towards the Lady Catelyn for her treatment of the Jon Snow, and this was putting a strain on the relationships of all three.

*She is my wife—mother to my children, a proper highborn woman, and I force her to share this shame with me. Her emotions are only natural, I understand that. But gods know I wish she could be kinder to the boy. Yet, I suppose ignoring him is the best she can do, and I do not blame her for it. Many wives would do far worse, and I have slighted her honor and forced her to face my infidelity every day.*

*I do not begrudge Benjen for his emotions; he loves all my children, as any brother would—Stannis had been reminded of Robert, who hadn’t even sent a missive when Steffon was born—but I wish he would show more tact, more understanding. Living with the two of them, whenever he returns to update me on how the construction is going, is maddening. I will have to foster Jon soon, just to halt it all.*

Stannis found it odd that Benjen was so involved in Jon’s welfare, but he knew his own experiences with his family had poisoned his views of brotherhood. And he’d never understand Northmen.

“Two of your sons are dead, Greyjoy, and your pathetic rebellion has been quelled!” Robert’s voice boomed. “Let this day show all sceptics the might of the Crown!”

Robert held his hand out, fist bloody. “Balon Greyjoy, so-called King of the Iron Islands, swear fealty to me, King Robert Baratheon, First of My Name, and I will spare your life and the lives of your remaining kin.”

The Greyjoy hesitated, but a Knight behind him shoved him forward. Balon’s beaten, pathetic form sprawled in front of the king. Stannis couldn’t tell what Ned Stark thought of the display.

Finally, the old, scrawny man shuffled forward upon his knees and kissed Robert’s ring. His lips came away bloody, and he wiped them upon his filthy robe. The men around Stannis cried out in victory, and Robert thrust his fist, Warhammer in hand, in the air to proclaim his dominion.

Stannis sighed; could he go home soon?

“Hear me, Greyjoy. As punishment for your acts against the Crown, I will have your son fostered with Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, as a reminder of your loyalty to the crown!”

Ned didn’t react; they must have actually discussed the decree beforehand this time.

Greyjoy’s head shot up. “Your Grace! He-he is my heir!”

“Yes, and Lord Stark will see to his education and hold him until such a time that you prove your
loyalty is absolute.”

Robert stepped away. “Before we all return home, I have two more matters to take care of. Come forward, Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone.”

The men around him stepped away, and Stannis grimly made his way to the king, aware of all the eyes present. He knelt and bowed his head. “Your Grace.”

“You have proven your loyalty to the crown, and to House Barathon with your actions. After my Master of Ships, Lord Crowen, fell in battle, Lord Stannis rallied the royal fleet, his own armada, and the ships from Old Town and House Redwyne, and took command to crush the Greyjoys at sea!”

The men shouted their support, and Stannis felt annoyance at all the commotion. He’d only been doing his duty.

Stannis remembered the chaos that ensued after the Master of Ships—a lord from some House in the stormlands—fell to Victorian Greyjoy, and he’d reacted quickly to ensure the men stayed ordered and united. They’d defeated the Iron Fleet at Straits of Fair Isle, which then allowed them to cross into Pyke. All he’d been thinking during the battle was the Iron Islanders were as fierce as he’d heard, and was glad he hadn’t chosen the westerlands to build Deanery’s castle.

No fleet could take a swamp, after all.

“As a reward for his service, I, Robert Baratheon, the First of my Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm, name you Stannis of House Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone, as my new Master of Ships!”

The men roared their support, while Stannis felt the ground beneath him crumble.

Bloody hells…I should have just let someone else take command against Victorian!

Stannis was finally content at Dragonstone, and now his brother was once again, for his own convenience, forcing Stannis to upend his life! And he couldn’t refuse without it slighting the king in front of his army!

Damn you Robert, will you never discuss a position with me before fucking decreeing it!

The man knew what responsibilities Stannis held, because he’d kept the king appraised of all his actions once a month for the past five years. Not that Robert ever replied, but he had to have at least read one! He was too bloody busy at Dragonstone, had gained too much momentum, to leave it all behind for a post he didn’t want! But no, Robert probably thought he was doing Stannis a favor, which only made all this worse. Forcing him into the viper’s pit that was King’s Landing.

I don’t want to play the bloody game of thrones…

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Stannis forced himself to say though clenched teeth. If Robert heard the reluctance, he ignored it.

“Secondly!” the king boomed, turning away. Stannis looked up to see Ned Stark’s grim face—he, at least, knew that Stannis didn’t want the bloody position. “The crown will hold a grand Tourney at Lannisport to celebrate the victory! It will be the greatest feast since we defeated the Mad King! Spread the news, everyone is welcome, and the prizes will be grander that your wildest imaginings!”

Most of the fools around him cheered, but many looked weary. They, like Stannis, just wanted to go home.
Bloody hells, what was he going to tell Myra?

*****

“You and the children will stay here, of course. I won’t force you to go back to that place. I will return every—”

“No,” Myra interrupted, halting his pacing. She looked up coolly from Steffon, who she held on her lap. The sleeping boy had Stannis’s black hair, but his startling violet eyes were pure Valyrian, and only a few shades darker that Daenerys’ own. The princess adored the similarity. She was asleep in the Lady’s chambers—which were now unofficially her own, as Myra and Stannis shared the Lord’s suites. “We will all go—all four of us.”

Stannis gaped at her in response. “But…I though you hated…”

“I do,” she said, voice cold. “I hate everything about this. It should never have happened.”

He got the sense that she was talking about much more than just his new position.

“But I will not let you walk into that viper pit alone, with only a cruel man calling himself your kin beside you.”

“Robert isn’t—”

“He is cruel to you,” she clarified, and he had no response for that. “A man who doesn’t ask his own brother’s opinion, who never responds to his missives, who ignores the birth of his son… That man is cruel.”

Stannis looked away. Myra rose and carefully placed Steffon in his cradle. She stepped towards her husband and tilted her head up. He kissed her sweetly in response, and feelings as new as the day he’d done it for the first time. He’d never stop loving this woman.

After a few moments, breath ragged, he broke away. “You know what this will mean. You can’t dismiss every maid who speaks of Daenerys and the Mad King—not in King’s Landing. You can’t punish them as you wish.”

Myra looked down, swallowing. “You knew about that? You never spoke of it, so I thought…”

“The Keep is your dominion, wife. And the punishment was just.”

She shook her head in denial. “I shouldn’t have…I felt horrible afterwards, watching her limp away. But when I head her speak of-our sweet girl going mad, becoming like that monster…I just couldn’t stop myself.”

He kissed her temple, holding her close. “Gossip is a disgusting habit. It destroys household.”

“I was so scared,” she whispered. “So scared that the Usurper King would hear the rumour and come for her.” Stannis’s gut clenched in horror, and he ignored her title for Robert. “So scared that Daenerys would come to me one day and ask me why they call her father the ‘Mad King’. Because then I would have to tell her the truth, Stannis. I would need to tell her all of it. But I thought ‘she’s too young--she should be carefree for a few years more!’”

He held her close as she trembled.

“Then stay here,” he said quietly. “Because in King’s Landing she will find out. You can’t protect
her from it, and she’s too intelligent for lies. Stay here, and give those carefree years.”

Myra hesitated, and he saw the conflict in her eyes, but then she shook her head. “No. No, you see, the world is a cruel place, but ignorance makes it crueler. She should know. She should see it—the city, the castle. The man who took her family’s place.”

The last sentence was ominous, and Stannis felt stirrings of unease in his heart.

“I can’t protect her—keeping her ignorant isn’t protection, it’s just a way to cripple her.” Myra’s face hardened, and Stannis knew she’d decided. “No, she needs to know. Her legacy, the danger in her blood—the danger that I can’t pretend away. She needs to see it, see King’s Landing, see what the Mad King has done.”

Stannis kissed her again. Then he pressed his forehead to her own.

“Alright, wife. We go together. But we will protect her, as she sees. We will help her as she grows up.” He kissed her again, lips curling as she grinned weakly at him. “Together, we will show her what a king is…and what he isn’t.”
Chapter Summary

Things are taken, lessons are remembered, and the future is planned.

The first thing Daenerys Targaryen was told before they left for the capital was that she was that they could no longer call her ‘princess’. That title belonged to the daughter of the king—and Daenerys was no longer that.

Myra had hugged her tightly, her gaze fierce, and assured her that that Daenerys would always be her princess—but cousin Stannis’s brother would not stand for it. For their protection, Daenerys was now simply ‘my Lady.’ At that time, the young girl hadn’t understood.

And so, the first thing that was taken from her was her identity.

During the few days it took to sail to King’s Landing, Cressen, Stannis, and Myra sat Daenerys down and told her everything. Cressen told her of Old Valyria, of the Dragonlords, the Doom, and the exodus of Houses Targaryen, Velaryon, and Celtigar. He’d spoken of how a dreamer had saved them and the last dragons from ruin. Dragons—who’d once been more than just carvings on a wall.

“The Blood the Dragons flows though your veins, my Pri—my Lady.”

Stannis told her of Aegon and his sister-wives, of the feuding kingdoms they’d united—all but stubborn Dorne—and the Throne forged from the breath of Balerion the Black Dread. He’d spoken of the conquests and wars fought since, of the Dance of the Dragons, the Blackfyre Rebellions, and the many victories and failings of the Targaryen Kings.

Of greatness and madness, and the coin the gods flip. “Ridiculous nonsense, of course. Madness runs in all families, Targaryen’s were simply powerful enough that their few black sheep painted history.”

Then Myra told her of the Rebellion. Of her brother Rhaegar, his wife Elia and their children, Aegon and Rhaenys. Myra spoke of prophesies and Princes, of Lyanna Stark and the fates of Brandon and Rickard Stark. Of Robert Baratheon and his war. Of the Trident and the Sack and of rubies lost forever.

“Prince Rhaegar did not harm that girl, my love. I would bet my life upon it. I grew up with your brother—I knew the man he was.”

Then, they told her of the Mad King.

“You are nothing like him. Nothing! Nor will you ever be,” Myra had sworn, clutching the terrified girl close.

On top of all this new knowledge, Daenerys was informed that King’s Landing would not be a place to visit and enjoy, but a place to fear; a place in which she must always—this, they repeated many times—have a guard at her side. She could no longer run away and explore by herself—Dragonstone was safe; King’s landing was not. Many would hate her for crimes committed before her birth, and few would be kind to a young girl with silver hair.
She was told that while she was loved amongst them—they would not always be able to protect her.

But Daenerys didn’t truly understand all they said until they stepped foot into the throne room of the Red Keep. “*Remember, my love,*” Myra had whispered fiercely as the grand doors opened. “*you are our daughter, by our choice. No one can take that from you. Remember.*” The room reeked of perfume, was filled with a pack of brightly coloured people, and the walls were covered in Stags and hunting trophies. The eyes of dead animals stared at her.

The King, Robert Baratheon, was a huge man with a dark beard and a large, golden crown upon brutish head. He sat upon a towering throne of swords—the one forged of dragon’s flame, she recalled. At the base of the ‘Iron Throne’ sat a beautiful golden woman with a feline’s cruelty, with a golden boy of three cradled in her lap.

When they’d knelt before them, before the cold eyes of the court, the King said, “Rise.” At Myra’s gentle touch, they all rose to her feet, but only Stannis raised his gaze. *Eyes always to the floor, my love. Remember that in court.*

“We pity you, brother,” the king commented. “Having to deal with dragonspawn filth”—he spat at Daenerys—“all these years. It was too harsh a punishment—we acknowledge that now”.

_Punishment?_ Daenerys felt coldness seep into her soul.

Beside her, cousin Stannis, voice devoid of anything, responded. “It was just, Your Grace. The punishment should fit the crime—and mine was severe.”

_What?_

Hurt was gathering in her chest—an alien feeling. Daenerys swallowed painfully, throat tight. She’d never before wondered _why_ she lived with Myra and Stannis. What had Stannis done that the king thought was so terrible? _Am I a punishment?_

Myra’s fist clenched briefly before relaxing, but her face remained lowered; reserved. Stannis stood tall and proud, face devoid of any warmth. Even gentle Ser Davos and always-smiling Ser Justin—a knight of house Massey, who was to be her guard—were somber and cold at her sides.

Daenerys wanted to go home; she felt like she was surrounded by _strangers._

And so, the second thing that was stripped from her was her understanding of how the world _worked._

_They love me…they do. They said so!_

The king let out a booming laugh. “Well said, brother! Well, it’s all behind us now. You can take your position as our Master of Ships, as you should have all those years ago!”

“Thank you, your Grace,” Stannis replied in that horribly barren voice.

Daenerys wanted to scream at them all. She wanted the world to make sense again! But she kept silent, trembling under the pressure of hundreds of eyes.

_Why are they acting like this?_

“I hear you have a son, now, brother. I’ve been kept busy in the capitol…my congratulations. To you and your lovely wife.”
Myra raised her head at that moment, voice sweet as honey and shy, “Your Grace has seven kingdoms to rule! We would never presume to think the birth of our son is nearly such an important matter.”

Daenerys heard a tiny, exasperated huff leave Stannis.

Robert frowned, eyes narrowed slightly. The words sounded like a slight, but they were wrapped in honey and said with such guileless sweetness that he quickly dismissed her.

“What’s a ‘dragonswawn,’ Mother?” the golden prince questioned, turning emerald eyes upon the Lion Queen. The ‘princess who was no longer a princess’ glanced up and briefly met the queen’s eyes.

Her razor-sharp gaze pinned Daenerys in place. “A snake, my sweet prince—stripped of her fangs.”

And so, the third thing that was taken from her was her sense of safety.

*****

By age seven, Jon Snow knew exactly what it meant to be a bastard.

It meant that he could never be better than Robb, not in their lessons, nor in their training, and certainty not in their manners. Lady Catelyn’s small cruelties—extra chores, extra lessons, smaller meals—were not worth the small satisfaction of beating Robb. So Jon didn’t answer the Maester’s questions, even when he knew the answers, and he didn’t allow himself to beat Robb at the sword, even through he believed that he could. And whenever some important lord visited, Jon made sure his manners were lacking when compared to Robb’s.

Jon learned that as long as he wasn’t a threat to her son, Lady Catelyn left him alone. And that was the only interaction Jon now wanted with her.

As a bastard, Jon also knew exactly what people saw when they looked at him. He was not simply a boy, not hightborn, and not as worthy of life as his siblings.

He was a stain upon his father’s honor—in the eyes of the Northmen; he was proof of Ned Stark’s betrayal—in Lady Catelyn’s gaze. And as for his siblings, Jon knew that no matter how much Robb smiled at him, or Sansa followed behind him, or how much the newly born Arya looked like him (finally, someone looked like him), he would never truly be their brother.

He would never really be a part of their family.

This fact was first underscored by five-year-old Sansa, who—due to her Mother’s influence—had begun to realize that Jon was different. She began to keep her distance from the boy that she used to happily follow behind; in her eyes, there was now a line between them. She began to call Jon her ‘half-brother.’

He’d never let anyone know how much that hurt.

For his part, Robb refused to call Jon anything but ‘brother,’ for which he was grateful, despite Lady Catelyn’s irritation. But even the bond between them changed when, the year before, Winterfell welcomed a new member. Jon resented Theon Greyjoy’s presence, because the older, meaner boy intruded in his relationship with Robb. The only thing that had ever been Jon’s alone—Robb’s friendship—was now split. Robb liked the older boy—liked to hear his stories of the Iron Islands and of the rebellion and of all the many, many things Theon had ‘accomplished’.
Jon through the older boy was full of shite (a new word he’d learned in the stables). Theon was only nine, what could he have accomplished? Besides, everyone knew that he wasn’t here by choice. But Robb liked him, so Jon tried to be amiable. But the two would never be friends.

“So you’re the bastard,” Theon had sneered that first day, when they’d had a moment alone in the yard. And Jon had known then that a ‘bastard’ was all he’d ever be to Theon. “Neat trick, bastard—managing to marry a princess. Don’t get arrogant, though—if the king wasn’t doing it to shame her, she’d never want you. Just like the whore who whelped you.”

Robb had spun around to find the boys brawling, rolling around on the ground and trying their best to do as much damage as possible. Jon, who’d been more injured by the time Ser Rodrik had pulled them apart, had technically lost—but he’d managed to give Theon a split lip, so, privately, he counted it as a victory.

Enraged, Lady Catelyn had sent them both to their rooms. Jon had learned later that Theon had still gotten supper. Just another lesson on what it meant to be the Bastard of Winterfell.

He never told anyone why they’d fought.

Theon, in his immature cruelty, had hit upon two of Jon’s greatest fears. The first, that his mother had been highborn and had abandoned him because he was a bastard. Because she’d refused to deal with the shame of raising him. He pictured a woman like Lady Catelyn—his only experience with the population—and his heart had hurt. Later, he’d wonder if the woman who birthed him had in fact given him up for some other reason, that she had wanted him.

But then why did his father refuse to speak of the woman?

The second fear touched by Theon Greyjoy had been regarding the future. He pictured a silver-haired woman with a hate in her purple eyes, gazing upon him with scorn from the day they wed until the day they died.

Jon Snow was terrified that he would grow up to wed another Lady Catelyn. He wanted to believe that his future wouldn’t be the same as his present, but Daenerys too was a southern woman. Besides, what woman, what highborn woman—a princess, at that!—would be happy to marry him, when all the realm knew that she was only doing it because of the cruelty of two kings.

Jon imagined no happiness in his future. He refused to delude himself.

But maybe…

No, you idiot.

What if mother…what if she did love me? What if she was highborn and kind? What if Daenerys Targaren is, too?

Sitting under the red leaves of the Weirwood, he banged his head forcefully against the wood. He was such a fool. Stupid thoughts like this only hurt him when the beautiful image shattered.

And the image always shattered for a bastard.

*****

Olenna Tyrell gilded into her idiot son’s solar, where the fool was eating pastries while trying to write upon a parchment. Crumbs were getting stuck in his beard, she noted with disgust. No wonder
he was getting fat.

“What have you done?” she snapped.

Mace jumped, head jerking up and eyes widening. “Mother? I—what have I done?”

The fool was actually asking her!

“You agreed to a marriage between the Florents and some crownland house, did you not? Or has the fat finally reached your brains?”

Mace flushed red, and guiltily set the pastry aside. “I—yes. With the heir to House Valeryon. Is—was that bad?” he questioned meekly. “His sister is the Lady of Dragonstone—close enough to Lord Stannis. You told me to make allies.”

Crone save her from fools. “No, Mace, what did you agree to give them in her dowry! I can’t possibly have heard right—not even you are so stupid!”

“Dowry?” his eyebrows scrunched together like caterpillars. “Why, just some soil. I though—it’s much cheaper than gold. Mother, what’s this about?”

She’d have to hire a new Maester. Is only they allowed women at the accursed citadel! Olenna sat down slowly, eyes never leaving her squirming son. She should have beaten him more as a child—maybe then he’d have consulted her before making stupid deals.

“Tell me, Mace. What is it that we do?”

He blinked, wary of her pleasant tone. “Do, mother?”

“In Westeros, son. What is the Reach very, very good at?”

“Growing…food?”

“Are you asking me or telling me, boy!”

He flinched. “We-We grow food. For the realm. Because our soil and climate…is conductive to agriculture.”

“Yes,” she hissed. “And then we sell the food. For gold. So how in the world do you think giving others our soil is less expensive than gold!”

Slowly, the wheels began turning, and her son blanched. “I—I didn’t think—”

“No,” she snapped. “But then, you rarely do. What did they want it for?”

His shoulders hunched. “A—something called a ‘glasshouse.’ It’s used to grow food—”

“In the north. Yes, I know. What would House Velaryon…Wait. Show me the letter. Stannis Baratheon organized the marriage, I assume. Get me his letter.”

Mace didn’t ask how she’d guessed, and quickly hurried to his desk while she impatiently tapped her cane against the floor. She could think of only one reason why Dragonstone would suddenly require soil for a northern glasshouse.

Mace handed her a parchment. She read over Stannis’s carefully worded proposal, his plans for the soil, and his offer of marriage on behalf of House Velaryon. She also read what the letter implicitly
said. Stannis Baratheon was still much too young and too honest to skillfully play the game.

“Interesting. You’ve done well, Mace.”

“What?” he gaped like an idiot. “But you said—”

“You can leave now. I need to think.”

Mace blinked owlishly, looking around at what was in fact his solar, but meekly did as bid. He gathered his parchment, inkwell, (and pastry, she noted with scorn) and hurried away. Her son may try to assert his authority in public, and she may allow it, but they both knew who ran the family.

She was carefully grooming her granddaughter to one day be in much the same position, but the man she’d lead would sit upon a throne.

She looked down at the parchment again, and then pictured the dower Stannis Baratheon, who she’d dismissed as a predictable bore. Olenna had no interest in boring men.

*Well…perhaps for a night or two, if they’re comely enough.*

The younger Baratheon brother loved his Targaryen ward. Enough to build her a castle in the most secure location in the Kingdoms, and ensure she'd never go hungry. He was willing to trade the head of a House for the girl's future. Olenna knew much about every blasted part of the continent—down to the boring details. She knew that information is power, and this information could change the realm. Yes, either Stannis loved the girl, or he was deeply under the thumb of his wife, a woman who’d been handmaiden to the previous queen. Regardless of the origins of his devotion, he’d ensured that she would run the most defensible castle in the kingdoms, a perfect place from which to plan a conquest.

Oh, Olenna has no doubt that Stannis hadn’t even considered such a thing—the man was much too boring to participate in intrigue. But what she did know was that while Stannis loved his ward, he certainly didn’t love his brother. His brother, the king, who was also the greatest threat to the girl.

Olenna wondered what would happen if Daenerys’s life was one day threatened. Or, better yet, if the girl one day realized what her blood meant, and wanted the crown for herself. Which side would Stannis Baratheon choose?

The Tyrells, still unpopular with the crown, were as far away from power as they ever had been. But this new alliance with Dragonstone, and the new Master of Ships, could help pave their way into the capitol. They would play nice, for now. This marriage and the soil were just the first steps.

Olenna would carefully monitor events in the years to come, and send someone to report on the Targaryen’s activities. She needed to know just what type of person this girl was.

And one day, Olenna would chose the side that would get her family closer to the throne.
Ned was sitting in great hall early one morning, Benjen his only company, discussing the latest news shared by the crannogmen. Apparently, now that the rivers that fed and drained the swamp had been fully unblocked, and fresh fish introduced into the waters, the odour was all but gone.

“Only an earthy smell remains—quite pleasant, actually—like moss or the forest after it rains. The waters are clearer as well—more blue than green, now. It’s certainly an improvement on the near overpowering stench of rot that we’d been faced with everyday prior. And the Essosi have finally stop spraying their accursed perfumes everywhere, thank the gods. It was sometimes worse than the swamp itself.” Ben shook his head, “I had no idea why Stannis Baratheon was so insistent on the place, but I’m beginning to see the appeal. Watching the castle be built is a strange experience, because you witness how truly impossible it would be to get in. And I’ve thought about it for hours!

Benjen leaned forward, eyes bright. “The Keep is made of hard, luminescent white rock that is resistant to fire. The walls are thicker than ten tall men, and the inner walls are about half that. The walkways between walls are barely large enough to accommodate a waggon, and no more than two horses or four men could walk side by side—and these are three gates between the front walkways and the back ones. If that’s not bad enough, there are thin holes in the inner walls they’d use to pour boiling oil through, and then set aflame. The walkways are basically a death trap, Ned. The architects are sadists.”

Benjen shook his head in admiration. “Now, even if by some miracle you could get though the outer walls, the actual keep is two tall men above the walkways—so breaking though the inner walls would be useless—you’d only find rock behind them. A draw-bridge needs to be lowered to allow anyone to come into the city itself. So any armies passing through wouldn’t even have access to the inner keep, so no chance of ambush. They can’t even starve them out—the bloody glassgarden is enough to feel residents in perpetuity! And forget any projectile weapons to break the garden—the swamp it too large for any ballista or catapult to have effect, and the bridges are too narrow for them to get closer.”

Ben leaned forward, eyes wide. “Now, if someone somehow manage all that and still have men left, you’d have to get past the barracks, which can house six thousand men, and the thick walls of the main Keep. It’s basically impossible! Well,” he laughed, “Unless you have dragons!”

Ned was astonished at all the thought that must have been put into the design—Moat Cailin the ruin had stood for hundreds of years. This new keep could last thousands more!

Excitedly, Ben continued. “And the crannogmen, Ned. What an interesting people. I can’t begin to guess how many other secrets they probably have. At times, it’s like they appear out of the very trees themselves. And they move so quietly I’m nearly positive they could murder us all without a sound, should they ever need to! I asked them to teach me, you see, but they’re very closed mouthed about it. But I’ll wear them down!”

Ned glared at his brother and the excitement the morbid news instilled within the younger man. But he was thankful that Ben was finally starting to find something to enjoy again—even if the cause was on the ominous side.

“I want to bring Jon with me, Ned, to show him everything. Only the foundation has been laid so far, but I think he’d enjoy the trip!”

At that moment, the doors opened, and Catelyn stepped inside. Her blooming smile died when she
saw Benjen.

For his part, Benjen paused, and then gave a great shudder. “Strange, Ned. It suddenly got colder. Has winter come already?” Then Ben made a show of ‘noticing’ Catelyn, and widened his eyes innocently. “Oh. Nevermind, Ned.”

Catelyn shot him a venomous look, and one of these days Ned feared she’d take the closest sharp object and try to kill his younger brother. “Ah, Benjen—back from your mud hut, already? It seems like you only just left.” Ned released a weary breath.

“Ned,” Catelyn turned to him, pointedly ignoring Ben’s attempt at rebuttal. “A raven came from the Wall. A few of the Brothers will be down here within the fortnight, looking for any men to take back with them.”

Ned nodded. “I’ll send messages to the surrounding villages and keeps. I’m sure there’s a few men who’ve decided to take the Black rather than face the sword.”

“Robb has also mastered another movement—he’s excited for you too see him.” Catelyn’s smile grew warm. “He’s a warrior, just like his father.”

Ned’s somber face softened—news of his son always warmed his heart. And this is why he loved his wife—even if she ignored Jon, at least she wasn’t cruel. She was a dutiful wife, and excellent Lady, and she loved their children with all her heart.

“What about Jon?” Benjen interrupted. “He practices with Robb—I’m sure he’s getting along as well.”

Catelyn looked at him coldly. “What care is it of mine? The boy isn’t anywhere near Robb’s skill. It usually takes him at least a month to catch up.” She gave a dismissive scoff. “He’s too skinny to match Robb’s strength.”

Ben narrowed his eyes. “For a woman who doesn’t ‘care’, you sure pay a lot of attention to how well—in comparison—Jon does.”

“What are you implying, Benjen?” She said, dangerously.

“Implying? Dear sister—I imply nothing. I’m simply curious about how you’d feel, and what you’d do, should Jon prove himself better than Robb.”

Enraged, Catelyn spat, “Why, you horrible little toad! As if a bastard could ever beat my son!”

Ben surged to his feet. “What’s the matter, My Lady? Am I hitting too close to home? You may have my brother wrapped up in your poisonous—”

“That is enough!” Ned roared, surging to his feet. “No more, others take you both! No more!”

Both gaped at him, stunned. Ned had never raised his voice against either one—against anyone. “For years I’ve tolerated your childish arguments! For years, I’ve hoped you’d one day resolve your differences! But I see the effort was too much for you!”

Ned glared at Benjen. “You are my brother, and I love you, but take care with how you speak to my wife! She is mother to your nieces and nephew, and Lady of Winterfell. She deserves your respect, and I will have no more of your baseless accusations!”

Ben’s eyes darkened with anger, while Catelyn shot him a triumphant look.
“As for you,” he turned to Catelyn, whose eyes widened in shock. “Benjen is my brother and you will treat him as such! I will come and evaluate both of my sons, and if I see that Jon is in any way holding back, we will have words, Catelyn!”

Ben shot her a bitter smirk.

His glare encompassed them both. “Now get out of my sight, both of you!”

The two scurried away. Gods help him, but he sometimes felt as if he had five children!

Restless, Ned got to his feet and made his way to the God’s Wood, his thunderous expression halting any attempt to stop him. In another year, perhaps two, he could foster Jon. The boy could grow up learning skills Winterfell couldn’t teach him, and then he would Wed the Targaryen girl and be Lord of his own Keep.

Ned released a weary sigh. And then he’d have to finalize the boy’s name and sigil. He’d have to erase the last bit of Lyanna that existed within Jon.

And no one would ever know the truth, unless his children looked more like their mother than they did Jon. But Ned had no way to solve that problem now. Let the gods be kind.

When he arrived before the weirwood, the boy of his thoughts was sitting against it, leaning back as he looked up through the leaves. Upon noticing Ned, the eight-year-old sprang immediately to his feet, looking down quickly. “Father. I can leave if…”

When did Jon stop looking me in the eye?

“No, of course not. I’m here for some peace, as are you. Sit, Jon.”

Ned studied his nephew as they sat side by side, watching as the boy slowly relaxed. I don’t spend enough time with him, Ned though guiltily. Some days, the memory of Lyanna was too much for him.

He did look too skinny—was he eating enough? Ned tried not to anger his wife by paying the boy too much attention in her presence—and he suddenly realized how stupid his actions were. Ben was right—he let Catelyn have too much influence on his behaviour. He couldn’t punish the boy for his own guilt.

“Are you—happy, Jon?” Ned stumbled awkwardly. “I mean, is Winterfell treating you well?”

Others take me, I don’t even know how to talk to him!

Jon looked up, his familiar grey eyes making Ned want to turn away. But he refused—it was time to stop fearing Lyanna’s ghost. “Yes, father. It’s more than I deserve.”

Ned studied the boy, shocked by the words.

“You are my son,” Ned said fiercely. “You deserve everything! Why—why would you say such a thing?”

Jon studied him, and Ned thought the boy’s eyes looked much too old. “I am a bastard, father. Most men would have left me to die somewhere. I know that you—that you’ve had to endure much for me. I’m grateful to you, more than anything. I wont shame you further, father. I know my duty.”

Ned stared at him, nonplussed. Lyanna…what have I done to your son?
“Jon,” he said abruptly, startling them both. Ned cleared his throat. “You don’t hold back, do you? That is, in practices with Robb. Perhaps in your lessons—you don’t…feel the need to hold back, do you?”

Jon watched him for many moments. “Why are you asking me that?”

Ned swallowed. “I want you to know that you can come to me. With any problem, no matter how small. I—I should have told you this years ago. If something, or someone, is making you unhappy, I want you to tell me the truth. You are my son,” he repeated. “Trueborn or not, I will not let anyone harm you. Now: do you hold back against Robb?”

Jon’s smile was slow, and his eyes shined brightly. “No, father,” he said slowly. “Robb is better that me, is all. But—thank you. Thank you.”

Jon leaned forward hesitantly, and rested his head upon Ned’s chest. He pulled the boy to him, holding him tightly. He ignored the boy’s shaking, and stared up at the crying face of the weirwood.

“I’m planning to foster you, soon. In a year, perhaps two.” Jon tensed, but didn’t move away. “You need to learn how to be a lord, and perhaps…perhaps time away from Winterfell would do you good. It’s a chance to see more of this world, Jon. I will compile a list of suitable places. You may choose, I promise. Perhaps…” Ned hesitated.

When he didn’t respond, Jon finally pulled away. Ned ignored his red eyes.

“Lord Stannis has been made Master of Ships—he and his family, and Daenerys Targaryen—are in King’s Landing. It’s—it’s a dangerous place, but you’d get to know the capitol—spend some time with your betrothed before—”


There was a desperation there that worried Ned. “Jon, do you not want to—”

“I do.” The boy interrupted, straighting his back. “She is a princess. Of course, I do. I will marry her. Just—I’d like to see the world first. Before marriage—sow my oats,” he muttered weakly, attempting a smile.

Ned didn’t believe him, this old-eyed boy of eight. There was too much fear in his stare at the mention of the wedding. Ned had no idea what was happening.

“She is not—Lord Stannis assures me she is a kind girl. If you’re worried about the rumours of Targaryen Madness—”

“Please, father.” Jon said desperately. “I don’t wish to talk about this.”

Ned paused, but nodded slowly. “You’re right, of course. Its much too early. It will be years before you marry—there’s plenty of time.”

Jon’s tense shoulders slowly relaxed, and he looked away.

His nephew was terrified of this marriage, Ned realized.

But he had no idea why.

*****

Daenerys hated everything about King’s Landing. The smell, the castle, the people. She hated how
she couldn’t be herself in public. She hated how the people would stare and mutter when she passed. She hated how different Stannis and Myra had to be. For nearly two years, she did nothing but hate.

Most of all, she hated the royal family.

The King, who would insult her any time she was in his presence—fortunately, they were few and far between. The Queen, whose serpent eyes would follow her as if desiring to take a bite. Her two newborn children, Myrcella and Tommen who she hated simply because they were the king’s children. She especially hated Prince Joffery, who was a cruel child that loved nothing more that to watch others living being suffer. One time, Daenerys had even seen the boy take a frog he’d found in the gardens and squeeze the poor creature until it ruptured, and then he’d laughed with hands covered in blood and guts. Daenerys had run away and thrown up into a bush—even Ser Justin, her shadow, had been pale.

Joffery’s favourite pastime—which she believed was encouraged by the queen—was pinching, scratching, and hitting her with his fists. Her body soon became a collection of bruises. The only time Daenerys had tried to fight back by pushing him away, he’d run screaming to his mother. Cersei made Daenerys lie prostrate before her rooms for hours—unable to run from the gawking eyes of the highborn residents and servants—or be flogged for daring to raise her arm to a prince.

It was the first time Daenerys had realized she was powerless. And she hated that most of all.

She’s stayed in her rooms for a full week afterwards, crying her eyes out. She begged to go home, but even Myra had betrayed her!

“You don’t love me! I really am just a punishment—why would you bring me to this horrible place, otherwise! I hate you; both of you!”

Myra had broken down, crying, and Stannis had stood there helplessly, pupils enlarged. Unable to apologize, even if the sight of them tore at her heart, she’d retreated to her rooms. She didn’t want to face anyone, ever again.

She stayed there, barely eating, for a month. She ignored their every attempt to talk to her; would scream if they tried. After a while, Daenerys hated herself.

Why bother to leave her room where there was nothing but misery outside?

It was Steffon that had finally snapped her out of it. The small boy, four years old, and the sweetest thing she knew, had crawled into bed with her and begun to cry.

Daenerys was shocked. “Why are you crying?”

“Everyone is sad,” he’d sniffed. “and I don’t know what to do. Why can’t you all just stop being sad?”

Why? Well because… Daenerys had paused. Why were they all so sad, anyway? Why did Myra bring them here, to this horrible place? Why couldn’t they have stayed in Dragonstone, happy?

Because no matter her horrible words, Daenerys knew that Myra and Stannis loved her and Steffon. Her tears drying, she’d pulled the sniffling boy close and stopped to think—really think.

“People will hate you, because you are his daughter,” is what Myra had said, on that long-ago boat ride.

My father, the Mad King. People hated Daenerys…but if she thought about it, really thought, she
remembered seeing pain in their eyes, sorrow. These people, who’d been in the city when her father had terrorized other, were tormented.

*Just like she was tormented.*

Were they right, to hate Daenerys—to treat her so?

*Just like I hate everyone and wish pain upon them.*

*I hate the royal family...but I also hate everyone associated with them, even though they are not the ones who hurt me.* Some of the Kingsguard sneered and spat at her, but a few, a golden man and a man with hair of white, tried to be nice to her.

But she’d hated them as well, as if they were all the same.

*I hate a baby boy and girl for what their parents have done to me,* she realized slowly. Just like so many people hated Daenerys for what the Mad King’s had done to them.

*Why would I do that? They're innocent, just like I am. What does hatred solve?*

*Pain. Hatred stops pain.*

But life wasn’t *all* pain. People could be good. Myra was good, Stannis was good, Steffon, and Cressen, and Davos, and Justin. The lords of Dragonstone. They made her happy...and she would hate anyone who hurt them. Would she try to hurt them back?

*But only bad people hurt others.* The king, the queen, Joffery, the highborn, the kingsguard...they were all bad...

But hadn’t Myra once had a maid *beaten,* to protect Daenerys? Was that good or bad?

Hadn’t Stannis gone to war and *killed* people, to stop the enemy? Was that good or bad?

Daenerys shook her head in frustration.

She didn’t know! She didn’t understand!

But...but maybe she didn’t have to understand—not *yet.* But she would keep thinking about it. About good people and bad people...and people that were both.

*Maybe all people are both.*

She didn't know...but Daenerys did know one thing—she didn’t want to be sad anymore. She was Daenerys Stormborn. Everyone told her she was a *dragon!* Well, dragons didn’t *cry.*

Daenerys shot up, scaring Steffon, and she quickly hugged him close in apology. Then she carried him to Myra, who jumped up from her place beside Stannis.

“Daenerys...”

Maybe they’d have been happy at Dragonstone—but bad people existed in this world, and Daenerys suspected that eventually they’d have found Dragonstone, too.

*Or maybe they’re already there. Maybe bad people are good people, and good people are bad. Maybe it was all about which side you were on.*
The princess—because she was a princess, no matter what some mean king said—squeezed Steffon close, gazing into his pretty purple eyes. He was the smartest one here. She kissed his forehead, then looked at the people who loved her.

Daenerys raised her chin. “There’s a lot of things I don’t understand. A lot of confusing things. But...I don’t want to be sad anymore. Teach me what to do so I don’t have to be sad.”

*So I don’t have to hate anymore.*
Stannis was awoken by a small form climbing into bed beside him. He instinctively jerked away, and swept the sheets aside to find a small silver head curled up beside him. The three-year-old Daenerys had tears in her eyes and was sniffling.

“What’s happened?” he immediately sat up, gripping his sword and sweeping the bedroom for trouble. But the pale red walls of the castle were the same as ever, the night sky calm behind the gently undulating coverings of the balcony.

Outside, King’s Landing was calm.

“I had a bad dream,” she whispered, crawling closer to him and shivering.

Stannis looked down at her and relaxed, bringing her closer. “Why not go to Myra? She’s better at soothing you than I am.”

*Where was Myra, anyway?*

“But you’re scarier,” Daenerys whispered, lashes wet. “Scarier than the nightmare.”

Stannis blinked down at her. Suddenly, she was seven years old and shivering. Her pale-yellow nightdress was ripped at the shoulder, and bruises littered her pale skin. “You can make the nightmare end.”

*I can’t. I can’t make it end.*

“You protected me, when I was a baby. You took me from that throne room when the king would have forced me to grow up in this horrible place. You stopped that nightmare.”

*Did Myra tell her all this?*

“What did you dream of?” he heard himself whisper, but he already knew. The wind rustled the curtains, but he didn’t feel a thing.

“They say he’ll kill me,” said the young woman in front of him, covered in a wolf’s cloak. Behind her was a shadow of a man with black hair, face hidden. Her pale red gown was covered in blood over the embroidered dragons, her loose silver hair stained with it. “When I go mad, he’ll come to me with his Warhammer and kill me. That what they all say. I know it’s true.”

*No—no. No one will kill you—*

The door to the bedroom banged open, and there stood Robert, a young, powerful man with his Warhammer in his fist. Behind him was a lioness licking her chops. Stannis sprang to his feet, sword in hand and covered in armor.
Around them, armies raged and men died, and in the distance a tall white keep was under siege. Its walls were crumbling. The banners of dragons were aflame.

“Move aside, brother! Move aside—you know you can’t stop this! She’ll die no matter what!”

“No! No, I won’t let you! Stop this, Robert!”

The king on the Iron Throne sneered down at him, and then threw his head back and laughed. “You’re too late! You’re just one man with a small island—what could you do against seven kingdoms!”

A warm wetness was seeping into his boots, and he looked down to see a pool of blood spreading. Heart in his throat, body cold, he turned. Corpses were piled up behind him—his people, his family—all staring at him with sightless eyes. “I’ll put their heads upon my walls, just like all the others!” The king, queen, and hundreds of people laughed.

“Myra…Myra! Steffon! No—no!”

A hand grasped his, and he jerked down to see a tiny girl, not even a year old, taking her first steps. This time, when she stumbled and fell, she didn’t get back up.

Stannis surged awake with a scream, shocking Myra, who’d been asleep beside him. “Stannis!”

Disoriented, eyes wild, he took heaving breaths, shaking. He looked down at his pregnant wife, her mouth moving with questions. Hands shaking, Stannis cupped her face and scanned her over, but she looked perfectly unharmed. He pressed his head against her breasts, only able to stop shaking when he heard the beating of her heart.

Alive.

Then Stannis surged to his feet and strode out the room, ignoring her calling after him. He shoved open a door across the hall, ignoring the startled Justin Massey standing outside. “My lord?”

Inside, on two beds, Daenerys and Steffon slept. The former stirred and blinked open her eyes, squinting at him in confusion. “Cousin? Cousin!”

Steffon jerked awake, eyes wide as he looked around in confusion. He finally focused on Stannis, frozen at the door. “Father?”

Alive.

Stannis stumbled forward and collapsed at the foot of her bed, placing his head down upon the covers, attempting to breath. Both children sprang up and converged upon him, scared as they called for him.

He opened his arms and the two cluttered closely, and their presence finally allowed him to take a deep breath. A gentle hand touched his shoulder. “Stannis,” Myra’s voice whispered. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” he croaked. Cleared his throat. “Yes. Just…just a night terror.”

“You can protect me from the nightmare,” whispered the dream apparition.
No. No, I can’t. I’m just one man with one small island.

What could I do against Seven Kingdoms?

*****

Three years in King’s Landing taught Stannis much about the realm. As he oversaw the construction of the royal fleet and equipped each vessel with a crew, he learned about the needs of small folk and about the materials available to Westeros. He studied maps of the continent, becoming familiar with it like he’d never before needed to, and planned ways of attacking different Keeps from the sea. He included in each scenario the best method of defending each place.

In regards to plans for King’s Landing, Davos’s expertise was particularly useful, as the man knew much about the ins and outs of city, particularly its navel weak spots. There were many small, unguarded holes through which one could smuggle things in or out—or smuggle soldiers. He’d put a stop to those weak spots, and used some of the sixty personal guards he’d brought from Dragonstone to protect each location until suitable men of the city watch could be appointed.

But the most important thing he learned—complimentary of the mysterious Lord Varys—is that the crown was bankrupt, and in the process of amassing a massive debt to both the Lannisters and the Iron Bank. Soon, the Lions would all but own the realm, but the King didn’t care as long as he got his drink, and his tournaments, and his whores. The newly appointed Master of Coin, Petyr Baelish, a sharp faced man with perpetually amused eyes—simply shrugged when Stannis made his worries known. “I serve the King, My Lord. And his Grace wants coin—he doesn’t care where it’s from.”

“You have to do something,” Myra had said, when he shared the news. She sat down carefully opposite Davos, hand upon her swollen stomach. Cressen sat at her side, and Daenerys beside him, looking on curiously. They believed that it was time for her to become more aware of the events of King’s Landing, so Cressen had begun to bring her to council meetings.

“How? Robert cares only about his blo—his amusements. And Tywin Lannister is only too happy to supply his Grace with coin.”

Cressen stroked his beard, then turned to Daenerys. “What do you think, my dear?”

“Me?” she asked, eyes wide. Myra and Stannis turned to her patiently. They did not expect a solution—but it was important to build her confidence.

“The crown is in debt.” Cressen summarized. “The King refuses to stop spending, but raising taxes could lead to starvation and rebellion. However, the place they’re borrowing from is dangerous. What solution do you see?”

Daenerys ducked her head and frowned in contemplation. After many silent moment, Stannis signed. They asked too much of a young—

“Um,” she said slowly. “stop borrowing from those people?”

She turned to Cressen, unsure. “Is that right?” He patted her hand, smiling.

Davos stroked his chin. “If there’s one thing I learned as a smuggler—beg you pardon, my Lord—it’s that people don’t much care where the merchandize comes from. As long as they get what they want, they don’t question how.”

Stannis leaned back in his seat. “Change the debt holder,” he pondered. “But who else can support the King’s spending? The Tyrells, perhaps—” Stannis’s mouth twisted with bitter memories of
starvation “—but even if they were willing, who is to say it they’re a better alternative? No, we’d have to find someone who we could trust to carry the debt, but who isn’t so dangerous as the Lannisters.”

He gave a weary sigh. This wasn’t his job, but he saw what the current queen was, how little she cared about the realm. He saw the cruelty in Joffery, his golden nephew whom he could barely stomach, let alone love. He saw the corruption in his brother’s small council. What else could he do?

*****

Stannis was reading the latest letter from Winterfell. At the time the letter was sent, Benjen Stark, the overseer, had taken Jon Snow with him to see the Keep. He would have to sail north soon, so that he could witness the progress for himself and meet with Jon Snow.

Ned was pleased with his son’s development, but Stannis was a much harsher taskmaster. He’d have to make sure the boy wasn’t an idiot; or growing up spoiled. And if he was anything like Joffrey or Robert, Stannis would have to act quickly. That type of behaviour must be corrected early, and he had little time remaining before Ned fostered him.

*Perhaps I will insist he comes here, if I am not pleased with his progress. I can educate him myself.*

And if the behaviour could not be corrected, he acknowledged ruthlessly, there were other ways of dealing with such a problem.

“A word, my Lord?” a calm voice interrupted his musings. Stannis glanced up to see Jon Arryn enter, and he immediately tensed. He’d developed a general distrust for any man loyal to Robert.

“My Lord Hand—take a seat,” he responded coldly.

The old man closed the door behind him, and locked it. Stannis eyed him carefully as he them made his way forward and lowered himself into the chair before Stannis’s desk. “We have never been close, my Lord. Although lately I find myself wondering what would have occurred, had you been sent to me, all those years ago, instead of your brother.”

Stannis narrowed his eyes. “I am busy, Lord Hand. Was there some business you had?”

The old man chuckled softly. “I always thought you were a cold man, Stannis Baratheon. Facing you now, with no other knowledge, I’d think the same.”

Stannis narrowed his eyes.

“But I see you, with that little girl. No matter how cold you act in public, I see the truth. The gentleness with which you handle her—the many lessons you allow her to learn. Lessons not usually given to female children. Why, I’d dare say you dote on her,” he chuckled.

Stannis was extremely uncomfortable with the idea that he was so obvious—or that someone had been reporting on Daenerys’ lessons. He’d have to find out who.

“That is why I come to you with this matter, My Lord. You see, in the past three months, two young women, and their children, have sickened and died.”

Stannis waited. The news was tragic, but he didn’t see why it should concern the Master of Ships.

“The girls were as different from each other as possible—one a castle maid, another a whore from Flea Bottom; one blond, another kissed by fire. Yet their cases have been mysteriously similar, but
no one else besides the children sickened.”

“What does the hand of the King care about two random women?”


Stannis sat, speechless. Robert’s children?

“It is tragic, of course, but why bring this to me? We both know of my brother’s—unsavoury tendencies. He must have dozens of bastards by now.”

Jon Arryn nodded soberly. “I keep track of every one, you see. Secretly. I try to support them—for Robert, who is like a son to me, despite his unfortunate behaviour. I thought it was a coincidence, at first. But two days ago, another young woman developed the same symptoms. I believe she and her daughter will be dead within the week. I have begun to think the deaths are purposeful.”

Stannis stared at him, and twined his fingers together as he thought. Why would someone murder the King’s bastards? Fear of them being legitimized and threatening the throne—but then why target the females, as well? Jealousy—possibly, but no simple person could orchestrate the murder of so many people—especially if the poison seemed natural. It must be expensive, then.

Poison is a woman’s weapon, my love. We must all know how to defend ourselves. Myra’s words back then had made Stannis uneasy—but he did not disagree about giving Daenerys the knowledge needed to protect herself. Women were too weak to use a blade.

“Is there anyone you suspect?”

Arryn hesitated. “Possibly—but neither of us have the ability to challenge the individual. The best course of action is simply to get the children to safety.”

“You want me to provide sanctuary on Dragonstone,” Stannis concluded. “At the risk of my own family, should this individual discover it.”

“I have taken steps to ensure the mothers will not be tracked to you, My Lord,” the Hand was quick to assure. “And in exchange I can get you something I’ve heard you’ve been trying to acquire.”

Stannis raised his brow, waiting. “The eldest bastard is an apprentice to Tobho Mott, a master smith. One of the few remaining individuals able to re-forge Valyrian Steel. A prize for any lord—and his apprentice, your blood—will inherit the skill. I’ve heard that you have found a challenging metal in your mines—surely a master could find out what to do with it. And even if it proves useless, many will pay you handsomely for the use of his skills.”

Stannis’s mind flashed to the strange, lightweight orange ore. “And how will you convince a master smith to give up a profitable business in King’s Landing and go to Dragonstone?”

Arryn smiled. “A mutual friend has already found a solution, My Lord. Both of your identities must be protected from the other, you understand. Now, do you agree?”

Stannis contemplated the pros and cons of the deal, but in the end, he pictures a sick, dying child with Baratheon blue eyes—and that decided him. “I will participate in the relocation—I’m sure you understand that I have little trust in another’s methods. No one must ever know of my involvement—not now, nor for any future children.”

“Agreed.”
And so, over the next few months, many young women—and their black-haired children—mysteriously disappeared. Upon hearing the news that a younger, “better” smith was coming to the city—by the King’s own demand, as Robert had found himself unsatisfied with a previous commission—an enraged Tobho Mott accepted a position at Dragonstone, with a newfound scorn towards the crown in his heart.

*****

Since Daenery had begun to pay more attention, her life in King’s Landing was much better. The first thing she’d done was found servants who seemed particularly sympathetic to her, and then offered them coin in exchange for information. She learned about the Royal family’s schedules—where they were most likely to be at any time.

Then Daenerys made it her mission to not be there at those times. In this way, her encounters with her tormentors greatly diminished, and she could finally breath in the castle. She did have power, she realized, just like Myra told her—she just had to know how to use it (even if it was just running away).

She’s also begun to try and be more open to people’s advances—instead of shunning small overturns of friendship from some of the braver highborn girls, Daenerys made use of them. She didn’t trust anyone—no one is your friend here, my love—but that didn’t stop her from speaking to them and collecting whatever news they had. In this way, she learned much about King’s Landing.

She learned that after encounters with the King, the Queen always wore gowns that covered her completely—making Daenerys reluctantly pity the woman. She learned that the King spent most of his time drunk, and with unsavory companions (She wasn’t sure what that meant, but she kept the information close).

The most important thing she learned was which parts of the castle to stay away from, and which men were dangerous. Now eight, Daenerys was beginning to show hints of the beautiful woman she’d one day be. She’d become aware that some men would stare at her in peculiar and frightening ways—Justin would always step closer to her in this presence, hand upon his pommel—and that bad things happened to girls who found themselves alone with them. She had a short list of names to avoid under any circumstances, and she wasn’t stupid enough to ignore the advice.

She didn’t know what would happen if she did, but she had a feeling it was something that she may not recover from.

It was these thoughts that occupied her, treading slowly through the garden, when a large man burst through the hedges to her left.

“Dragon bitch!” he screeched, plowing into Justin and knocking him to the floor. He ran at her, arm raised high, and a knife glinted in his fist.

She screamed, instinctively throwing her arms up to cover her face, when suddenly a blond blur appeared and knocked Daenerys to the floor. A sharp, feminine cry of pain resounded, and the princess pushed herself up in time to see the knife plunge into an older girl’s arm. Seconds later, guards burst through the entrance of the pathway.

Her attacker cursed and ran back the way he came, disappearing through the foliage. Daenerys lay there, eyes huge, staring after him as men converged upon her with their swords drawn. A few broke away and dove after her attacker. Justin appeared at her side, “Princess! Princess, are you harmed! I—I should have been more attentive—I should have seen him—”
Daenerys held up an arm, halting him, and crawled towards the other girl, who was weeping as she clutched her bleeding forearm. Daenerys remembered a time when cousin Stannis came looking for Master Cressen during her lesson. He’d been cut in the training yard. Daenerys had watched as Cressen quickly tied the wound up.

Not hesitating, the princess took hold of the loose sleeve of her green dress and tore a large strip from it. The crying girl looked up, and slowly yielded her wounded arm. Trying her best, Daenerys quickly wrapped her makeshift bandage around the wound.

“That will have to be okay until a Maester can look at it,” she concluded.

“Thank you,” she girl said, voice shy and sweet.

Daenerys shook her head incredulously. “Me? Thank you! You—you saved me!”

The girl ducked shyly, golden ringlets bouncing. She was dressed like a servant, Daenerys noted. “I was passing though and saw him in the bush. I saw his knife and just—just ran forward!” She placed her fist upon her chest. “My heat is beating so fast! It was so scary!”

More tears gathered, and she collapsed inwardly, giving great heaving sobs. Daenerys didn’t hesitate —she wrapped the girl in her arms. “Come on, I’ll take you to a maester,” she soothed gently.

Slowly, the girls and an extremely attentive Justin made their way to the set of rooms belong to Lord Stannis’s household. They quickly found Cressen. Moments after the girl was patched up, Stannis and Myra burst into the room, faces pale. Myra cried out and quickly enveloped Daenerys in her arms.

Enveloped in the safety of Myra’s arms, the princess finally broke down and sobbed. No one had ever tired to kill her before! She’d never been so afraid in her life.

Stannis drew them both close, bowing over the pair.

They stayed like that for many moments before he stepped away and turned to her wide-eyed savior.

“I am Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone, and you have done a great service to House Baratheon. Tell me your name and position, servant, and I will reward you richly.”

The girl blanched, and she immediately knelt on the floor, bowing deeply. “M’lord, p-please, I did nothing. I—just let me go, please.”

Stannis narrowed his eyes. “You’re not a servant,” he concluded, looking over her ill-fitting uniform. “Who are you?”

She bowed even further. “Please m’lord—I was hungry. A girl who works in the castle sometimes came to my mother’s dressmaking shop. I—I didn’t m-mean to steal, but my mother died and I…they kicked me out and I was so hungry…”

“You took her old uniform and snuck into the castle,” he concluded, scrutinizing her. She couldn’t be more than three years older than Daenerys. “A crime punishable by death.”

“Cousin Stannis, please!” the princess sprang up. “She was just hungry! And she saved me! You can’t punish her!”

“I—I will serve your household, m’lord!” The girl swore, eyes hugged. “You’ll have my eternal loyalty, please—please don’t turn me over to the castle guard!”
Stannis looked down at the trembling girl. “As punishment for your crime, I order you to take the position of my Ward’s personal maid. You will serve her, obey her, and be loyal to her for the rest of your days.”

The girl’s eyes grew huge, and her lips trembled in a smile. “Yes, m’lord. Thank you, m’lord!”

Daenerys grinned and hugged cousin Stannis close. They all knew this wasn’t a punishment—not for a poor orphan girl.

She rather liked this, Daenerys thought—helping people who needed it.

She then gently helped her saviour to her feet—she stood a head taller than Daenerys.

“My name is Daenerys Targaryen,” she said shyly, nodding when the girl gasped in shock. “What’s your name?”

The golden-haired girl, with eyes of liquid cobalt, smiled with guileless innocence.

“Tyene, m’lady. I swear, I will serve you loyally in all things.”
Jon Snow had never left Winterfell before. He’d spend most of his life within it’s dark walls, ate in it’s great hall, and slept within a small room besides Robb’s. The farthest he’d been away from the Keep was into the surrounding woods, joining his father and some of the men on hunts. The men would shoot down birds or small animals, and he and Robb would go to collect them. Sometimes, he, his brother, Theon, and some other boys would perhaps go riding together—a valued time for Jon, in which he could finally breath through the ever present pain in his chest—but that was never far from Winterfell, and always accompanied by at least one guard.

So, when his uncle Benjen invited him along to spend a few months with him at Moat Cailin, to meet and greet the surrounding lords and get an idea of the land’s he’d one day oversee, Jon had jumped at the chance. Month without Lady Catelyn; he’d not even hesitated in accepting. Robb had wanted to come along, but Jon had mixed feeling about it—on the one hand, his brother was a wonderful companion, but on the other, Jon felt that he’d like to experience this alone. Furthermore, had the heir to Winterfell traveled along, they’d have to bring many more guard, and so he’d been more relived than disappointed when Ned hadn’t allowed it.

Now, after constant travel upon horseback for nearly ten and six days—Jon’s thighs were aching fiercely by that point—he’d begun to smell a change in the air. The lands grew damper, the soil muddier, and the world took on a strong earthy sent—like the God’s Wood after rain. It wasn’t the sharp pine scent he was used to, but neither was it unpleasant. Surrounded by such a powerful sense of nature, Jon felt as if freedom was finally in his grasp.

No man could oppress the elements.

The closer they got to Moat Cailin, the father his heart beat. He’d known for as long as he could remember that a Keep was being built for him and his future bride. That all the lessons he shared with Robb, all the times the lords of the North saw fit to greet him, all the many things he’d been given that a bastard didn’t deserve—they were all because he’d one day be a lord.

The thought was dizzying.

_A lord, with a castle…with a highborn wife to sneer at me._

Over the past year, as Jon matured and gained a greater understanding of the acts that occurred between men and women—complimentary of Theon, who was neither discreet nor shy about sharing details—he’d begun to contemplate children.

Jon knew that Lady Catelyn treated him as well as he deserved, but he was sickened by the idea of his future wife treating their children in the same manner. Would she scorn them? Order the servants (many of whom would be sent with her from Dragonstone, and thus loyal) to punish them in the
ways Catelyn punished Jon? Would she hate them for not being purely highborn?

Will she love them...these children with my blood?

He’d tormented himself with these thoughts for many hours, sitting under the God’s Wood and imagining scenarios with a silver woman being cruel to small children with his hair and eyes. She was a Targaryen Princess: he’d read the extensive histories of House Targaryen, and was both enamoured with their amazing acts, and aware of their fiery rages. She was a Targaryen who was being shamed before all the world, and her children would only be reminders of that. He couldn’t imagine her loving them.

But I will, he decided, stubbornly. He would spoil them and spend time with them and make sure they knew they were wanted. He would do all he could with the little power he would have to protect them. (And it would be little; Jon Snow was not a fool, he knew Stannis Baratheon would be the real lord of Moat Cailin.)

Jon Snow didn’t know the Master of Ships personally, and Ned rarely spoke of the man, but the many people he asked would describe the Lord of Dragonstone as having Northern Ice in his veins. The few men that had met him during the Rebellion remembered a somber face and chilling eyes.

“A man who’d kill you for displeasing him, that one.” Ser Rodrik had mused, recalling their meeting during the Rebellion.

Jon gathered that Stannis Baratheon was a man to fear. He was someone that had had control of Jon’s life for years. He’d been appraised of Jon’s lessons, his progress, his temperament—and of who knew what else. He’d been responsible for the direction of Jon’s life from the moment he was betrothed. He’s even the one building my future home. Stannis Baratheon probably knew more about Jon Snow than some of the people he’d grown up with at Winterfell, and that was a chilling thought.

“Lord Stannis cares for the Lady Daenerys,” Ned had once said, although Jon couldn’t remember the context. But he did not doubt the words; no man was so careful with the details of a ward’s future, unless he was personally invested.

So perhaps Lord Stannis was not so cold as he seemed—but that just made him more dangerous to Jon.

She will run the household—and I will just be an accessory. Someone who the Lord of Dragonstone would probably have killed, should I displease her.

Sometimes he contemplated running away. To the Wall or to Essos—away from the shadow of his marriage.

And then he’d be flooded by guilt, for being so ungrateful. What right did a bastard have to complain about a beautiful wife, children, and his own keep?

“You’d better be grateful for all Lord Stark has endured.” Lady Catelyn’s words.

“You poor wife—saddle with you!” Theon’s mocking laugh.

“You own Keep, Jon! You’ll be my bannerman someday.” Robb’s excited voice.

“You are my son.” his father’s fierce declaration.

I will not run. I know my duty. I will make my father proud.
“Look, Jon!” Benjen’s exited voice broke into his contemplation. They rode side by side atop their horses, three more men behind them. “Right over this hill, you’ll be able to see the wetlands and the construction. I think you’ll be pleased.”

And Jon was. The swamp was massive, so large that the small island center upon which the castle was being build seemed tiny in comparison. Only the foundation was laid, but as they got closer Jon saw the outline of the Keep. Six thick double walls, interlaid with the beginning of six towers, and a massive keep at the center. To the right, Jon saw another building being laid out, but the remaining space around the main Keep was barren. The entire thing was made of pale white stone—he’d never seen it’s like, but when the weak sunlight touched it, it shimmered.

They approached it slowly, dodging hundreds of workers who carried massive blocks between them, and the shouting of various overseers. The bridge into the moat was so narrow, only two horses closely walking together could fit. Jon was so close to his uncle, their legs occasionally met. This isn’t a castle; it’s a fortress.

“What is this stone?” Jon questioned when they arrived, reaching out to touch it. Despite it’s gentle façade, the rock was hard and rough.

“Some material imported from Essos, said to be resistant to fire. One of the architects—a man from Myr—insisted upon this stone. The Myrish are architecturally advanced, apparently. Their buildings are all made from this rock, which is naturally found in their mountains.”

“It must have been expensive to bring it here,” Jon said, unsure.

Benjen just shrugged. “A trade agreement with Dragonstone—I’ve never asked for the details.”

Jon thought Stannis Baratheon was an impressive man, being able to gather all this. “One of the architects?”

How many did one castle need?

“There are six. Come, I’ll introduce you.”

Jon obediently followed behind—they climbed up the wooden bridge into the higher city region, of which the main keep was central. Looking around now, Jon was amazed by how massive it would all be. Benjen continued to point out little details as they passed. “Immediately to the right, through that gate there, will be the barracks, and the training yard behind it. Then the Gods Wood—we’ve already planted the saplings; pine, maple, birch, and a Weirwood see we hope takes room. Next will be the main village and market—which will complete the rotation back out to here, the main courtyard. he whole castle is oriented so the main keep is at the center of everything.”

“This is amazing,” Jon marveled.

Ben grinned at him. “Just wait until we have the finished product—with the glassgarden atop the keep. Sallero already has plans for a private area in it for the main family—as if you’ll need more space!”

Jon jolted at the reminder. Me. Me and my family will live here. Gods…

“Oh, there they are!” Ben pointed to a group of six men, standing within where the main Keep would be. They were all grouped closely around a table, a makeshift wooden overhang above then, contemplating some parchments. Around them workers shuffled and carried blocks, and some were piling them atop the outline of the walls, slowly raising the castle.
“No!” spat a man dressed in bizarre, colourful clothing, whose dark skin was golden in the sun. Then man’s accident was melodious, but heavy. “Do you have no sense of art! Balconies, I say! Balconies are needed!” He stabbed the table with a finger to underscore his passion.

“You Essosi have no idea what Winter’s like! You want them to freeze to death?” Argued a man with dark blond hair and a think beard. He was dressed in thick Northern leathers.

“I rather like the idea of balconies—perhaps with a door to keep out the chill,” said another Westerosi man, rubbing his clean-shaven chin. His clothing was more southern than the other man’s—but familiar compared to the Essosi garb.

“Secret passages under the balconies would be excellent—no one will look for them there until it is too late,” suggested another heavily accented man, with dark hair but very pale skin. He was skinny and held himself a bit hunched over.

“I think balconies are an excellent idea,” Benjen called out, garnering their attention. They nodded in greeting as Jon and his uncle came to a halt before them. Jon eyes the complicated looking plans on the table.

“Aha, so this is the little Lord,” said the blond northerner. Jon met dark brown eyes, and nodded at them all.

“Jon,” Benjen began. “ Allow me to introduce you. This—” he pointed to the bald man enamoured with art, who nodded in return—“is Thoreqor of Myr; he’s in charge of ‘aesthetic appeal’, although I have no idea what that is. The man beside him—” the blond northerner “is Harold, an architect from White Harbor; he’s to ensure the castle can withstand the northern climate. Next we have Vyresso Hestassar of Braavos, he deals in secret rooms and escape paths.” The pale Braavosian gave Jon secret smile. “Edmund of Bear Island in an expert in glasshouses.” A large man, who looked to be at least three times Benjen’s age, gave a brisk nod in greeting. Ben motioned to a small, slight man next, who smiled slightly. “Arlos here was sent by Lord Reed to ensure we can easily traverse the swamp, and to fix matters regarding construction in the wetlands. And finally,” Benjen’s voice showed a hint of reluctance. “This is—”

“Ser Orys of Driftmark,” interrupted a pale haired man, eyes so blue they were nearly white. He looked Jon up and down in assessment, mouth twisting as if he was unimpressed. Jon felt his frown deepen. “I’m here to ensure this castle is up to the standards of a Targaryen Princess.”

“Ser Orys is mostly an overseer—sent by the Lady of Dragonstone. Eventually, he may actually do something,” Benjen muttered, ignoring Orys’s glare. “This is Jon Snow, my nephew and, eventually, the Lord of Moat Cailin.”

“Good to meet you all,” Jon responded quietly. The men—all but Ser Orys—returned the greeting genially.

Jon and Benjen spent the rest of the day overseeing construction and resolving small technical issues. Then Benjen retreated to a makeshift tent to look into the next shipment of materials, and Jon found himself wandering the grounds. One day, his people would populate this place, but for the life of him he could not imagine what the future would be like. At least—he could not imagine it a happy one. Jon ended up in the young God’s Wood, surrounded by fragile saplings, and stopped before a small mound. The weirwood seed had to have been planted here.

This forest will grow with my family.

“It will sprout,” assured a quiet voice, startling Jon. He hadn’t heard anyone approaching. The young
boy turned to see a short, slight man behind him. He had brown hair, a thin greying beard, and was completely covered by dark green cloak. Jon noted a strange, three-pronged weapon slung over his back. “I know Benjen is worried, but the old gods haven’t forsaken Moat Cailin. Perhaps, eventually, the Weirwood will even gain a face.”

Jon shook his head automatically. “Old Nan told us the Children of the Forest carved the faces—but they’re either a myth, or all gone now.”

The man crouched and patted the mound of earth softly. “The Children are mysterious,” he smiled. “They may return for one more face. Perhaps a laughing one, this time.” There was amused irony in his voice. Jon thought it an odd comment; all the weirwood he’d seen cried.

“Who are you?”

“An old friend of your family, my boy. Howland Reed.”

Jon’s eyes widened, and he immediately gave a clumsy bow. “Lord Reed, I—thank you. For all you’ve done to help us…to help House Stark. We could never have done all of this without your assistance.”

“No need for formalities, Jon Snow. The crannogmen have no use for them. Besides, I owe your blood a great debt.”

Jon frowned. He knew of no such thing.

“House Stark once did me a great boon; avenged my honor, when I was too terrified to do so myself. Now, I am great friends with the quiet wolf, and House Reed’s loyalty is not to be questioned.”

Jon nodded somberly. “My Lord Father has never doubted it, my Lord.”

Howland chuckled softly. “I come here today with an offer—you will be fostered soon, and House Reed would be honored to help you grown into manhood. To teach you all you must know about this land. Perhaps even some skills you don’t realize you posses.”

Jon was shocked—no one had ever wanted him before. He’d assumed his fostering would be forced upon some reluctant Northern lord. “I—why?”

Immediately mortified, Jon was quick to say “Not that I am ungrateful, of course! I simply…I am a bastard, my lord. Would it not…” Jon trailed off.

Howland frowned at him. “You are a son of Stark, Jon Snow, no matter your birth. And you will be Lord of Moat Cailin. My wife and I will take you, happily, into our home, and you will mature alongside our children. You will learn our ways, taste the freedom of the crannogmen, and visit often with your uncle. You will watch the castle with you. An appealing proposition, do you not agree?”

Jon swallowed hard. Yes.

But it sounded too good. Years of rejection had made Jon Snow wary. At least he could understand a reluctant lord, but someone like Howland, who seemed to want Jon with him, was peculiar.

“I… I would have to ask my Father, my Lord. I—I cannot consent without his agreement. Although, I am sure he will be please,” Jon hurriedly assured the man, worried of insulting him.

Lord Reed smiled softly. “Of course, a son must be dutiful.” The mysterious man stepped forward and patted Jon on the shoulder. “In my household, you shall not face what you currently do.
Southern cruelties are beneath us.”

Jon paled in shock, frozen. “How…?”

Lord Reed clasped his hands behind his back. “I will visit again, Jon. Many things are beginning, many songs that only the trees know. I hope your path is towards me, but it may not be so—too many play the game. The wolf and the dragon, the lion and the stag, the sun and the rose …fish, falcon, kraken—countless more. All simply pieces on a board.”

The man turned and walked away, not making a single sound, and Jon watched him, feeling queer, as he disappeared into the darkness.

*****

Tobho Mott was a Qohorik master armorer, one of the few remain men alive able to rework Valyrian Steel, and yet that fat pig King dared to insult his masterpieces!

When he’d noticed less and less customers in his shop, he’d gone to enquire only to learn that the fat king had dared say his armour was subpar—that it could not stop a child! Never in his life had Tobho, who fashioned every piece with all the zeal and pride of a perfectionist, been given such a scathing review. Not only had it lost him is business, but then word of the new better smith coming from the free cities had reached his ear.

It was not to be borne—Tobho had too much pride to tolerate the insult. A smith better than he? Some young upstart who had not the smallest of knowledge on metal and crafting that Tobho had spend years mastering! No—he simply could not stay in this accursed city any longer.

Originally, he’d planned to return to Essos—there was more Valyrian Steel available there anyway, and he’d not practiced his most beloved craft in years. However, then a challenge had reached his ears—a peculiar ore had been discovered on Dragonstone, and no smith to date could uncover its secrets. So, when news of his relocation spread, and Stannis Baratheon had come to him with the offer of seeing if he could smith the metal when ‘all others have failed’ he’d been intrigued.

Surly all the others had failed because they were simply incompetent. Cracking this ore would boost his pride, and show Westeros that he was truly a master, and nothing of his was subpar.

Now, two months later, staring down at the blackened remains of yet another piece of orange ore, he began to regret his arrogance.

“It may not be possible, Master,” his eight-year-old apprentice, Gendry, sighed. “Another mystery, just like Valyrian Steel. It’s too light, anyway—it probably won’t be useful.”

“No metal eludes Tobho Mott! I spend three days once, in Qohorik, keeping a fire at the exact same temperature, constantly vigilant, no sleep or food! I shit in a bucket, and never once stopped fanning! No mere ore will allude me!”

And so they tried again and again. He became obsessed with it, working twelve hours a day, refusing any other work, even dreaming of it.

He was Tobho Mott: Master smith. And he would not fail!

Mott had one thing that most men lacked—the one thing that separated genius from common: Perseverance. The word impossible only existed for the lazy, he believed. Valyrian Steel, for all it’s difficulty, had a secret—one he’d hidden since leaving the shadowy sorcerers of Qohor: fire and blood. Oh, he did not know how the ancient masters of Valyrian had done it, but he knew blood-
magic and dragon fire were key—the latter of which Mott did not possess, so he did not dwell upon uncovering the secrets of Valyria.

But this metal is not magic, its origins are natural. It will yield!

Six months after he’d begun, he finally had a breakthrough. The process was so complicated, so convoluted, that Mott only tired it out of desperation. It was a bastardized version of what he did to Valyrian Steel.

Together, he and Grendy watched as pure silver metal bled through the bottom of the iron pan. For a moment, they simply stared as it dripped down onto the ground, sizzling at the contact, shocked that something other than blacked remains had emerged.

“Master…master I think we did it!”

“Quickly! The mold—now!”

They watched, breathlessly, dark rings under their eyes, as the metal filled the shallow round mold. Hands shaking, Gendry used a tong to grip it, and placed it into the water, and a powerful steam was released.

The men held their breaths, and Gendry slowly raised up a perfectly silver, sound metal plate.

They cheered in celebration! Yes, yes! After months and months of obsession, they’d done it!

You see, fat pig king. I am a Master!

He held the plate in his arms, smoothing his fingers over it. It was shockingly light—perhaps only half the weight of iron.

“Bring me the hammer—we should test how weak it is. Well, it does not matter in the end, it is so plentiful it will be a much cheaper alternative to sell to the common folk. Cups and plates and the like.”

Gendry shook his head. “I can’t believe we worked so hard for a few cups.”

“It’s the principle of it, boy! The challenge—not much alludes me these days, but this was invigorating!”

Chatting casually with his apprentice, Tobho placed the plate upon his anvil, and gently banged the metal with his hammer, expecting it to dent.

The plate was unmarked.

Surprised, he tried again—just a bit harder.

Once more, no mark.

Feeling peculiar, Tobho met eyes with the quiet Gendry, and then, with a shrug, slammed his hammer down upon the plate with all his might.

A tiny dent was the only result.

Mouth dropped open, man and boy stared. “That’s—that’s impossible,” he muttered, although he didn’t believe in the word.
“Bring me an iron plate—quickly!” Perhaps the hammer was damaged?

Gendry scramble to do as bid, returning immediately with the heavy metal. Tobho swung his hammer down as hard as he could, and, as expected, only a tiny dent remained in the iron plate.

Man and boy stared at the two plates, dumbfounded. The dent on the former was only a miniscule bit larger than the latter’s.

The new metal was twice as light as iron—but only a tiny bit weaker.

They’d just made a monuments discovery.

*****

Tyene had served Deanerys for nearly three months now, and her arm had healed splendidly. The blond girl quickly learned all the duties of a maid: dressing her, bathing her, brushing her hair, accompanying her through the castle. Myra had done most of these things for Daenerys previously, but while she was missed, Myra was busy now with her pregnancy, and Daenerys found she rather liked the idea of a new friend.

My first friend.

Everyone in her life had always had an agenda for getting close to her, but Tyene was just the daughter of a seamstress who had saved her life. To her surprise, the other girl was actually five and ten—much older than she looked. Daenerys was hopeful that she didn’t look like a baby in the older girls’ eyes, and that they could be true companions. Already, the Tyene was opening up and asking Daenerys many questions about her life and past—something Daenerys loved to reciprocate, as she enjoyed hearing about all the interesting things Tyene knew.

“I simply cannot imagine wedding a man I have never met, m’lady,” Tyene said, voice scandalized. “Why, and a bastard at that,” she whispered, as if the word should not be said by proper folk.

Sitting in front of a mirror in her room, Tyene behind her as she brushed her hair, Daenerys frowned. “Bastard?”

The brushing stopped. The pause was so long that Daenerys turned around, noting the girl’s wide eyes. “You…m’lady, forgive my impertinence, but…how much do you know about your betrothed?”

Daenerys shrugged, “Cousin Stannis said that he’s taking care of everything. Why, what’s a ‘bastard’?”

What a strange word, Daenerys thought. But if she considered it, she could vaguely remember hearing the people of King’s Landing mutter it around her. But it had not really registered, miserable as she had been these two years, and Daenerys had figured it was simply another insult such as ‘dragonspawn,’ ‘dragon bitch,’ ‘dragon whore,’ or another of the colourful terms she’d been faced with. She didn’t know what any of the words meant, but the insult was clear.

Tyene came around, and kneeled before the young princess, her eyes serious. “A bastard is a child born outside of wedlock. Did you not learn about the Blackfyre Rebellions?”
Daenerys frowned. “Cressen simply said it was a branch of House Targaryen that wanted the throne for themselves. And, we haven’t had time to go very in depth—not yet. But I don’t understand—why is it bad?”

Slowly, Tyene told her the full story of Daemon I Blackfyre, born Daemon Waters, who’d been son to Aegon IV Targaryen and his cousin, Daena the Defiant. Daenerys listened carefully to all the information, and about how Daemon eventually founded House Blackfyre. “Since the many rebellions, bastards have gotten a terrible reputation in Westeros, m’lady. They’re seen as power-hungry threats to trueborn children. Most are usually held in contempt—seen to be even lower than the small folk. in the north, especially, having a bastard is a stain upon a House’s honor. Only Drone does not care.”

Daenerys contemplated this. She knew there had to be some reason that the mean King was forcing her to marry Lord Eddard Stark’s son, but she had no idea it was because he was apparently lower than lowborn.

Daenerys had never really thought about her betrothed before. On Dragonstone, she’d been too young and more concerned about her castle than the man who would share it. Here in King’s Landing she’d been so miserable that her future wasn’t even something she’d considered—besides hoping is was better than the present.

Besides, cousin Stannis said he was taking care of it, and Daenerys trusted him above all others. He’d told her, all those years ago when she’d placed a tiny dome upon the miniature Moat Cailin, not to worry, that ‘he’d take care of everything,’ and she’d believed him. At the moment, Daenerys felt rather stupid—she was so interested in the many peoples and cultures of the world, yet she hadn’t spared much thought to her own betrothed.

Perhaps because it had been an accepted constant in her life since birth, and she hadn’t even thought to question it. Perhaps because no one else ever mentioned him—Jon Snow, she vaguely remembered—so she hadn’t seen it as all that imminent. They were not for another eight years, after all.

But she was thinking about him now.

“The marriage is to shame me, isn’t it? And my children?” The thought made her angry, and her voice reflected it. “The king wants to humiliate my House.”

Tyene watched her carefully, blue eyes spinning with hidden thoughts. “Yes, m’lady.”

“Well,” Daenerys raised her chin defiantly. “He won’t succeed! I will judge Jon Snow on his actions, not on some silly name forced upon him by ignorant people. After all, many trueborn are horrible, but that’s just who they are, not because of their names!” Daenerys nodded; she knew now how the world worked. “But many are kind, as well. Cousin Stannis says people should be judged on their merits and actions—just like you, Tyene, who saved me because you’re a nice person.”

Something flashed across the blonde’s face, but Daenerys was too angry to pay attention. The silver princess sprang to her feet and begun to pace. “So many people have hated and cursed me in this horrible place, and I almost let them win and hated everything too! But that’s not right, you see, because there is good in the world, you just have to find it and keep in close.

“When I wed I’ll have my own home and my own family, and Myra and cousin Stannis and Steffon and the baby on the way will visit me often—or I shall visit them. I will have you, and my knights, and my husband, and my children. I will be happy, you see!” she declared. “And the King and Queen and all the others can laugh and say mean things all they want, because it won’t matter to me
at all! I will create my own household—my own world. Hightborn, lowborn, bastard—they’ll all just be meaningless words!”

Tyene stared at her, mouth parted. “My lady…”

Not noticing the sudden change in accent, which Tyene quickly scrambled to hide, Daenerys strode towards the door, purpose in her every step. The blonde maid rose, a bit dazed, and hurried after the impassioned girl. “My—m’lady?”

Daenerys strode all the way across the castle, chin high and hands clenched, a scrambling Tyene and Ser Justin following behind. She ignored all the looks she got from various servants and residents; Daenerys Targaryen had a purpose.

The princess strode into Stannis’s study, where he looked up from his parchment and then jumped slightly when she slammed her hand against his desk.

“I want to write letters! Like you and Lord Stark—I want to get to know my betrothed! I want to write letters to Jon Snow!”

When Stannis just stared at her, Daenerys frowned down at him, put her hands on her hips, and said. “Well?”

He blinked. “Alright.”

Chapter End Notes

The Ore is known as Bauxite—more commonly known as Aluminum. I found that out many chapters ago when I was looking into dragonglass (Obsidian). Both are extremely common in volcanic rock. Aluminum is half as light as Iron, but only a small bit weaker. It’s used in airplanes for this reason.

However, the method of smelting Bauxite is so convoluted, it eluded scientists until the 1800’s. Here, historically, past smiths on Dragonstone have also tried and failed, so the Targaryens deemed their mines basically useless, and didn’t try again. But I thought Tobho Mott, who can smelt magic metal, could figure it out, so I just gave him the opportunity to apply his (canonically) stubborn perseverance.

How much do you think the people in Westeros and Essos would pay for armor that’s just as strong but half as heavy? And it seems Stannis has a monopoly—unless people want to venture into Valyria. >:

Am I stacking the weight in Stannis's favour? Maybe, but its a fan fic, so oh well. :)
Over the past two months, Jon spent many hours just exploring the lands, speaking to the builders, and getting to know his uncle and the architects.

Benjen, while often melancholy, showed genuine excitement and care for the castle. He’d often chat about this part or that, and Jon would listen intently. Recently, they spoke of a letter from Winterfell, informing them of the birth of Brandon—Jon now had another brother, and he hoped Bran was more like Rob than Sansa in his feelings towards Jon. Sometimes, Benjen and Jon would spar with a sword, and because Benjen didn’t know how good Jon was supposed to be, the boy could finally give it his all. Benjen was pleased by his nephew’s progress, often praising him happily.

“Not even your Lord Father was this good with a sword at his age, Jon! And he was the best of us four!”

“Four? I thought you only have one other brother. Uncle Brandon. Who else…?”

Benjen had retreated then, his joy gone and pain in his eyes. Jon had not asked again, and Benjen had not explained what he meant. Jon was immensely curious, however; his father never spoke of the past. What other boy had sparred with the Stark brothers—and what had happened to him?

Whenever he was not with Benjen, Jon would spend time either along, thinking and observing, or speaking with the architects.

Thoreqor of Myr was an interesting, passionate man whose love of art was reflected in all his plans. He spoke proudly of Myr, of the beauty of the city and the quality of their sculptures. He’d told Jon bits and pieces of his past, shocking the young man when he’d casually revealed that he’d been born a slave.
“My master was a kind woman; she was a lover of the arts, and when she saw my talent with building plans, sent me to apprentice with a famed architect. Eventually, I made enough money to free myself, though she was sad to see me go. Since then, I’ve traveled around Essos, working and immersing myself in the arts of the Free Cities. Westeros, I must say, is lacking in comparison! But this castle will be a jewel of beauty!”

The man also had a lack of interest in Jon’s bastard status. The Free Cities, he said, did not much concern themselves with legitimacy—and the slaves cared even less. Jon, for the first time, felt a strange lack of pressure in his chest. No one had truly not cared about his birth before.

Vyresso Hestassar of Braavos had a similar disinterest in Jon’s birth. The pale, skinny man rarely spoke, but Jon found that he enjoyed being in his presence. There was no pressure to say and know the right things to the man.

The Westerosi were another matter. While Arlos, the crannogmen, did not divulge his thoughts on the matter of Jon’s birth, the boy got the sense that the small man had his own biases concerning legitimacy. Still, there was no conflict between them whenever the man would take Jon thought the swamp lands, teaching him the safe routs, dangerous corners, and methods of hunting the game.

For his part, Harold of White Harbor definitely had some problem with Jon, but he was task-oriented, and thus didn’t speak of it. Jon was reminded of many of the men in Winterfell, who treated him much the same way.

As for Edmund of Bear Island, Jon got the sense that the man just didn’t care about anyone—he was completely focused on designing the glasshouse, and the rest of them could rot, for all the attention he paid them. That, too, was a refreshing attitude.

As for Ser Orys of Driftmark…there was a man Jon could happily do without. He sneered at everything, complained about this detail or that, and always looked at Jon as if he’d spat in the man’s wine. Jon couldn’t tell if he was just generally bad-tempered, or felt the need to loudly express, every day, how inadequate everything was out of some sense of Targaryen loyalty. Jon tried to stay as far away from the man, because not only was he unpleasant, but Orys’s attitude just supported all of Jon’s fears about his future wife.

Still, regardless of that one dark part, Jon was immensely enjoying his time at Moat Cailin. And the frequent visits from Lord Howland Reed, who would tell Jon stories about the past and about the Neck, were always anticipated. He would sometimes appear at night in the God’s Wood, and they’d spend hours under the stars talking about everything. The Lord of Greywater Watch was mysterious, and his words were often cryptic, but he was kind.

Jon decided that he would ask his father for permission to be fostered with Lord Reed, as soon as they returned to Winterfell next month.

All in all, the nine-year-old was having a great time. But then, one day, Benjen came into Jon’s tent with a grim face, and the young boy knew everything was about to change.

“A raven came, Jon. Lord Stannis is sailing north as we speak. He’ll arrive at White Harbor within the fortnight.”

For a second, all Jon could hear was noise in his ear, and his stomach dropped.

“But—but he…Isn’t he Master of Ships? He must be busy,” Jon argued desperately. He wanted this illusion of contentment for just a while long. Lord Stannis could—would—change everything.
“Stannis Baratheon isn’t a man that will simply believe the words of others. He’s coming to evaluate everything himself.”

And I’m included in ‘everything’.

“And he decided now, that you’re also in Moat Cailin, would be a good time. He’ll ride back to Winterfell with us at the end of the month, as well.”

Gods, nearly a whole month with the man. Jon felt sick.

Benjen sighed deeply. “We’ll have to relocate to White Harbor for a few days to wait for him. It’s also a good opportunity to get to know the Manderly’s a bit better.”

Another castle, more highborn.

_Crannogmen, who ‘cares for the Lady Daenerys’. Jon suddenly felt a near overwhelming desire to run. Perhaps he could convince Thoreqor of Myr to abandon Moat Cailin, and then travel with the man through the Free Cities. At least then, Jon could be free._

“You are my son.”

But Jon knew he never could.

“When are we leaving?” he asked somberly.

Benjen came closer and placed him hand upon Jon’s shoulder in comfort. “At the end of the week. Don’t worry so much, Jon. You’re smart and talented with a sword. That’s all anyone will expect of a boy of nine. Stannis Baratheon is a fair man, if nothing else.”

Jon doubted that the rules of fair play included bastards, or that Stannis Baratheon would be charitable even if Jon proved himself the smartest boy and best swordsman ever seen. No lord would ever be able to overlook his name.

_But Lord Reed did…_

Jon ruthlessly banished the thought. The crannogmen were not like any other people in Westeros—and Stannis Baratheon was a southern lord.

And so, Jon spent the next few days getting ready to travel, and wandering through the skeletal castle at night.

_I will face him head on—meet his challenges. Jon through, repeating the words. I will show him that I can fight, and that I will treat the Lady Daenerys well. I will show him that this bastard has honor, no matter what others may say._

_It’s all I can do._

The next morning, an exhausted Jon Snow met his uncle at the gate, and horses saddled, the men set course for White Harbour. Ser Orys was accompanying them, and for once his scowl was gone. At least someone was excited about this visit.

“Lord Stannis is a hard and fair man,” the knight boasted. “He is intelligent, talented with a sword, and knows exactly how to run a keep. Dragonstone and its lands have prospered under his rule—Westeros will prosper as well.”

Jon glanced at the man. “Didn’t he conquer Dragonstone during the Rebellion? I thought Driftmark
was loyal to House Targaryen. Lord Stannis is a Baratheon—loyal to his brother, the king.”

For once, the man didn’t sneer at Jon—he looked affronted. “His unfortunate birth aside, Lord Stannis is one of us.”

Jon turned away, perplexed. He felt like he’d just learned something important. Benjen was eyeing Ser Orys carefully, his face thoughtful.

The rest of the trip to White Harbor was eventless, and every day that passed saw Jon’s mood plummet further. Soon the smell of earth was replaced with the sea, and more and more people were seen on the roads.

They soon saw the white walls surrounding the only city in the north, and the most prosperous house.

“Tell me what you know of the Manderlys, Jon,” his uncle ordered.

Obediently, Jon recited, “House Manderly migrated to the North from the Reach during the Andal invasion. They founded White Harbor, and their sigil of a man with a green beard and fishtail, who carried a trident, upon a blue background.” Jon continued relaying the information he’d memorized; their House words, the structure of the city, the two harbors separated by the Seal’s Gate, the major trade that occurred. “They’re the only House of the North that still has Knights and tourneys like the south. Their current Lord is Wyman Manderly, who supported Father during the Rebellion. I-I don’t remember if I learned about his family, but I do know that they live in New Castle, and that Ser Marlon Manderly is the commander of the garrison.”

Ser Orys was eyeing him, and for once Jon didn’t see derision in the man’s eyes. He felt his chest swell with pride, thankful that he’d paid Maester Luwin such careful attention—although lessons were not his favourite activity.

Benjen smiled, pleased. “Ser Wylis Manderly, his eldest son and heir, is married to the Lady Leona, he and has two daughters, Wynafryd and Wylla. Lord Manderly second son is Ser Wendel Manderly, unwed, and favors a bow. Ask him to show you how to shoot, and you’ll immediately win his regard. Also, don’t stare when you first meet them—although they’re rather eye-catching.”

Jon raised his eyebrows. “What do you mean? Are they very impressive?”

“Yes. Let’s just say they’re rather larger than the man upon their banners.”

The humor in Benjen’s tone let Jon conclude that the men were probably not the good kind of impressive.

They entered the city after declaring themselves, and Jon looked around in awe—he’d never seen so many people in one place, nor so many buildings. Merchants and smallfolk were bartering in the markets, children were laughing as they chased each other through the streets. Jon was impressed by the stone pathways—in Winterfell, all the ground was dirt.

They passed an alleyway, and Jon spotted a brunette clad rather loosely, who met his eyes and grinned. “My, my, what a pretty boy you are! Visit me when you’re older, pretty, and I may do you for free.” She licked her lips and smiled lasciviously.

Jon felt his face flame, and quickly looked away, remembering some of the maids at Winterfell looking at Theon the same way. He met Ser Orys’s sneer. “Looking at whores already, boy?”

“N-No, I wasn’t—” but the knight already turned away, whatever small charity he’d given Jon
during the trip now gone.

*Gods, he’ll tell Lord Stannis!*

“Don’t listen to him,” Benjen said, loudly. “He’s just cross because she didn’t invite him.”

Ser Orys shot Benjen a poisonous look. He didn’t look at Jon for the rest of the trip, and the nine-year-old found his awe gone, looking down at the saddle as they continued on.

They reached the castle soon, and were greeted by the *large* Lord and his equally large son. Jon tried not to gape. Sansa, who was always crying about Knights and their beauty and chivalry, would be horrified.

“Benjen Stark! My boy, it’s been years!” The lord laughed, booming, and enthusiastically patted Benjen on the back.

“And this is our new young Lord, hmm?” He turned to Jon, smiling. While the man looked carefree, Jon observed the careful way the Lord’s eyes roomed over him. Benjen had warned him that the Lord of House Manderly was much smarter than he’d like people to believe. “Welcome, welcome! Come, we’ll get you settled in and then have supper. Lord Stannis should dock any day now—we’ll save the feast until then!”

Jon wondered idly if they would have thrown a feast had Robb been among them. There was a cold pit in his stomach when he contemplated the answer.

During the next two days, Jon spent time greeting the coolly polite Lady Leona, and meeting her young girls. She wasn’t impolite, but Jon got the sense that she wasn’t pleased with his presence. As more time passed amongst the highborn, he began to feel the weight upon his shoulders increase.

As Benjen recommended, he asked Ser Wendel to help him with the bow, which warmed the man to Jon. The knight was in fact very good, and did teach Jon some new techniques.

“My son is in need of a squire,” Lord Wyman smiled, approaching them in the training yard. “And I hear your Lord Father is considering fostering. Perhaps you’d like to be a Knight, Jon. You can’t get that anywhere else in the North! Besides, we’re too be neighbours—relationships are important!”

Jon wasn’t fooled by the casual words—the Lord of House Manderly wanted something from him, or more likely from his father. “They are, my Lord. However, I do not have a say in my Father’s decisions. I will, of course, tell him of your offer.”

The fat man smiled. “Good, good. And your half-brother, young Robb? I hear he is growing into a fine young man. It’s a shame he didn’t come along—my family would have loved to meet him.”

*And I guess you’d have wanted him to meet your granddaughters, in particular.*

Jon ignored the sting of being reminded that Robb was his half-brother. “He is well, my Lord. Lady Catelyn did not think it wise to allow the heir to Winterfell to travel when so young.”

*But she couldn’t wait to be rid of me.*

“Of course, of course.” Ser Wendel nodded, smiling at his father. “Lady Catelyn is as wise as she is beautiful, father! And such a kind, proper lady—as loving as the Mother, for accepting and raising a bastard all these years!”

Jon only gave a brittle smile in response. *I do not want to be your squire.*
That night, he went to sleep with the familiar feeling of isolation. This is what it would be like for the rest of his life—meeting lords who are polite to his face but in truth would never forget his birth. Perhaps even his very wife would be the same, if she is not openly hostile.

He couldn’t decide which would be worse.

The following morning, Stannis Baratheon arrived. Jon stood between his uncle and Ser Orys, his back as straight as he could make it, his heart pounding in his ears. *Gods, please don’t let me make a fool of myself.*

Lord Manderly and his whole family, this time dressed in lavishly in full House colors, stood in their main courtyard as a contingent of men entered the gate. Jon felt faint when he first saw the tall, muscled man that led them, dressed severely in grey and black, with a massive sword at his hip. *That’s what he’ll use to kill me, Jon through, absurdly.*

When Stannis finally stopped before Lord Manderly, *towering* over them all, Jon let his eyes carefully roam over the man. He was imposing, with a severe face, dark, receding hair, sea blue eyes as warm as steel, and thin lips pressed together tightly. Jon couldn’t tell if the man was unhappy, impatient, angry—or just *calm*. He could understand why so many feared Stannis Baratheon.

“Lord Baratheon!” Lord Manderly boomed, joyfully, but there was a slight tremor in his voice. “Welcome, welcome! I trust your journey was pleasant.”

“Lord Manderly,” the Lord of Dragonstone responded, nodding once in greeting. His voice was impassive and deep, and he didn’t respond to the other pleasantries.

“We’ll have a feast prepared, my Lord! At once, to welcome you!”

“No need,” Stannis replied, startling the lord, who finally allowed from strain to show on his smile. “We will only stay for two days, then we must be going. On behalf of House Baratheon of Dragonstone, thank you for your hospitality. If you have any business to discuss, we can do so later.”

Stannis turned away, dismissing the man, who could only release a weak “Of course,” in response. Then he came to stand before Jon, looking down at him with no warmth in his eyes, lips pressed together tightly. His shadow blocked out the sun, plunging the small boy in darkness. Jon looked to the ground, terrified to somehow offend this hard man. The silence was oppressive—it was like everyone was holding their breaths alongside Jon.

After a pause, Stannis turned to Benjen, voice unchanged. “You are Benjen Stark?”

Ben cleared his throat. “I am, my Lord. On behalf of House Stark, welcome to the North. This is your first visit, I believe?”

“Yes. Come to my chambers later. Bring my Ward’s betrothed—we have much to discuss.”

Benjen must have nodded, but Jon still refused to look up.

‘*My Ward’s betrothed.*’ This *man raised my future wife. Gods…*”

“My Lord,” Ser Orys stepped forward, confident. “Construction is going as planned, and I assure
you that everything will meet your standards. I trust the princess and Lady Myra are well. Congratulations on your son and newborn daughter, my Lord. We were all pleased with the news.”

Jon finally found the courage to look up, noting Ser Orys’s genuine smile.

Stannis’s voice thawed, growing warmer. “Ser Orys. I’m confident you’ve overseen the construction carefully—Myra spoke well of your dedication. They are all well.”

Ser Orys bowed deeply, “Thank you, my lord. And I am glad to hear it. I will walk you to your rooms and we may speak further.”

“Very well. Lord Manderly?”

The man jumped, startled at being so suddenly addressed. “Ah-hem. Yes, Lord Baratheon?”

“My men require rooms—I trust you have everything ready. Send someone to speak to Ser Davos should you require a private meeting. Good day to you all.”

That done, the southern Lord turned away, with a quiet, grey-haired man at his back and Ser Orys chatting at his side.

Jon couldn’t help but be a little in awe, watching with all the others as Stannis Baratheon strode away. The Lord of Dragonstone had only been here a few moments, and he’d all but taken over, as if born to command men.

This man raised my future wife.

For the first time, Jon Snow found himself curious about his betrothed. Who was she, besides a highborn woman that would hate him?

*****

Stannis sat at a small wooden table in his chambers, looking into the fire. It was colder here in the North—despite it being summer, it felt as if winter was coming.

Perhaps that’s why the Starks have their words—in Winterfell, it must feel like winter is always coming.

Stannis found himself displeased with the chill; Daenerys should always be in flowing gowns, and warm, southern climates. The girl already kept a fire lit within her chambers in King’s Landing—how would she fare in the dreary North?

Fire in her blood, that one. And in her temperament.

His mind flashed to her tiny, determined face and solemn violet eyes when she’d handed him a sealed letter. “Don’t read it, cousin. It’s private.” He’d promised seriously, hiding his amusement. He eyed the letter now, laying before him on the table, sealed with the Targaryen sigil. He was absurdly curious about what Daenerys would have to say to a bastard boy she’d never met, but he knew his shrewd ward had probably made sure the boy would tell her if the seal had been broken. And then Stannis would be on the receiving end of a tiny spitfire’s rage.

Yes, Daenerys was all dragon—unlike her betrothed.

Stannis contemplated the skinny, dark haired, grey eyed boy he’d met. Jon Snow hadn’t even been able to meet Stannis’s eyes, but the Lord knew he was intimidating, and thus had turned away to not
frighten the boy any further. However, if the timidity was normal rather than situational, Stannis found himself equally pleased and displeased. On the one hand, Daenerys would have no problems controlling such a husband—on the other, such a man would not be able to command his peoples’ respect.

Oh well, there would be time to speak with the boy—and learn his true character—later. Perhaps he’d be more confident in private, and it was the audience that had meekened him.

Stannis turned his attention to the boy’s physical form, which was a more imminent concern. Jon looked as if he’d grown up a peasant, rather than a Lord’s son, with how skinny he was. He remembered Eddard as being larger—more muscled. Although people often forgot the fact due to how quiet the man was.

The were many reasons Stannis could think of why the boy was so thin, but Eddard’s letters spoke of fondness, so Stannis doubted there was any mistreatment.

*Unless the Lord of Winterfell is unaware of it.

Stannis banished the through. It was much more likely that the boy simply had a skinnier constitution: he may have gotten it from his mother. Still, Stannis would have to speak to Ned about it; if the child was to develop any muscles, he’d have to eat more.

A knock sounded on the door, and Stannis bid them entry. Benjen Stark appeared, with Jon Snow behind him.

“*My Lord,*” they said, the boy’s voice much quieter, bowing deeply.

“*Take a seat,*” he instructed, motioning to the two chairs before him. Benjen did so at once, but the boy remained on his feet. Stannis eyed him. “*Does the chair displease you, Jon Snow?*

The skinny lad jumped, raising startled eyes. “*I—I’m sorry, I just assumed—*” he broke off and quickly sat, looking mortified as he stared at the table. Stannis leaned back, thoughtful.

*A bastard,* he contemplated—for the first time. Despite Ned’s feelings towards the boy, Stannis was suddenly sure Jon wasn’t well received by many of the people he met. For his own part, Stannis didn’t have any experience with bastards—he’d never been in the presence of one, as far he knew—but he was vaguely aware of how the realm saw, and treated, them. Despite his future Lordship, Stannis doubted Jon Snow had ever been treated like his trueborn siblings.

Stannis, a man who didn’t much care about the opinions of other, preferred men to prove their own worth. Davos, for example, had done so, but Stannis’s sense of justice still pushed him to punish the man for his past crimes. However, he had no interest in punishing a child for the circumstances of his birth.

And Daenerys Targaryen had inadvertently taught him a lot about the sufferings a name could bring—and so he found himself pitying this child. Myra, he knew, was much more bitter regarding Jon’s legitimacy, but his wife would probably think *any* man as somehow unworthy. Her loyalty to the late Queen was powerful—and had never wavered.

“*Jon Snow, *” Stannis finally began, “*look at me.*

The boy did so slowly, his eyes fearful, but Stannis saw a hint of defiance as well. Interesting.

“How are you with a sword?”
Jon opened his mouth—but hesitated. Benjen jumped in. “I spar with him, my Lord. Jon is truly talented—sometimes he often comes close to besting me.”

Stannis shot the man a look. “As I do not know your skill, Benjen Stark, I cannot say if that is a praise or not. Do not interrupt again.”

Benjen shrunk away, a small scowl on his face. Stannis turned back to his ward’s betrothed.

“Speak, Jon Snow. And be honest about your skill—nothing is more irritating to me than false humility. Every man is aware of how good—or bad—he is with a sword, no matter what he may boast.”

Jon took a deep breath, and when he answered, his voice was quiet but unwavering. “It does not take me long to master a new movement, my Lord. Perhaps a few days after Ser Rodrik—our Master-of-Arms—introduces it. I am faster than my… half-brother, whom the Master praises heartily. Ser Rodrik won many battles during the Rebellion—his skill is well known in the North.”

Benjen shot Jon a shocked look, opening his mouth but then snapping it closed.

Stannis narrowed his eyes. “This surprises you, Stark. Why?”

“I—” Benjen glanced at Jon, who refused to look his way. “My brother’s wife—The Lady of Winterfell—seems to believe Jon is months behind his brother.”

Flushing, the boy stared harder at the table.

“I see,” Stannis contemplated. “You hold yourself back. Why—is your brother cruel to if you win?”

Jon’s head snapped up, gaze fierce. Interesting. “Robb is my best friend—a wonderful person. He would not—he wouldn’t care if I was better. He is better at the lance, and I do not care about that. Most of the time…” Jon quickly deflated. “It’s just that…”

“My wife,” Stannis began, “is often annoyed when another boy bests my son during practice. Steffon is good with a sword, but she expects much from her children. However, although I doubt she would ever sabotage his opponents, she probably has contemplated it, when stuck by pettiness. Has the Lady of Winterfell—or mayhap your Master-as-Arms—done more than contemplate?”

Jon refused to meet his eyes, but he nodded, once. Benjen sprang angrily to his feet, slamming his fist upon the table. A large boom resonated, and Stannis watched impassively. “I knew she was doing something! I knew it; I saw it—how meek you were when I returned, how withdrawn! I knew it had to be her; who else would dare! But Ned asked you—why did you deny it!”

“Uncle Benjen, please,” Jon said, humiliated. He shot Stannis a quick look. “Not—not here…”

Benjen hesitated and seemed to remember where they were. Hastily, he bowed. “My Lord, I beg your pardon.”

Stannis waved it away. “And in your lessons? Do you similarly hold back there, as well? Lord Stark spoke that you were fairly advanced, although less so than your brother. I did not think much of it, until now.”

Jon carefully said, “I do not always…answer questions that I know. Sometimes, I know more than Robb, however. I don’t know if I could say I’m better there as well—sometimes he remembers things I forget,” Jon proclaimed loyally.
Stannis nodded slowly. “Tomorrow, I will ask the Maester to test your knowledge—and general skill. I will also watch you spar with a Ser Oyrs—or perhaps a Knight of House Manderly—to evaluate your talent with a sword. Fortunately, Knights are plentiful here, and few of them share the Lord’s…stature.”

He saw Jon quickly hide a smile, but Benjen snorted. Stannis found himself rather pleased with this meeting. He was beginning to develop a rather charitable image of this boy—who was thoughtful, talented, and had a hidden passion for those he cared for. He was also loyal, with was a good quality in a husband. Daenerys would probably be pleased.

She’d wanted to come, but Myra had refused. Stannis knew his wife was too paranoid to allow Daenerys North with anything less than a thousand men. Not even her husband is skilled enough for her liking, he thought in amusement.

The two Northerners rose and bowed, taking his words as a dismissal.

“One last thing, Jon Snow.” The boy turned back attentively. “My ward has written you a letter. You can send your response when we reach Winterfell” He held out the parchment, watching with interest as the boy blanched and eyed the paper as if it was a venomous viper. When Jon slowly raised his arm to take it, Stannis noted his trembling fingers. Interesting.

“Is an eight-year-old girl so terrifying, Jon Snow?”

Jon blushed deeply, and quickly took the letter, holding it carefully in his hand. Stannis thought he was making a point not to look at it. It seems your betrothed has thought of you quite a bit, Daenerys Stormborn. Should I be amused or offended of his fear?

*I think, instead, that I pity him.*

Stannis would have much to discuss with the Honorable Ned Stark.

*****

Myra Baratheon spent her three years in King’s Landing trying to catch a rat. She’d first developed her horrible suspicion years ago, before the birth of her beautiful boy. Now pregnant, with her second child, she knew it was the perfect time to act.

Four months into her pregnancy, Myra had sought out Ser Redmond Seaglass, and knight amongst the company they’d brought from Dragonstone. His small House had been loyal to House Velaryon for generations. As a young girl, Myra and her siblings had often spent her afternoons with the kindly older man, who had sailed all over the known world and had many fascinating stories. She knew he was fond of her, and thus would do as she asked without much question.

“Ser, a moment, if you will,” she smiled, gathering the attention of he and a few other loyal men.

Redmond came to her, aged face wrinkled with laugh-lines, and bowed deeply. “Of course, my Lady. If there anything the matter? Shall I get Lord Stannis?”

“No, no,” she smiled sweetly, drawing him farther away from prying ears. “I have a rather—strange request, my Lord. A surprise, for Daenerys.”

He raised his brows curiously. “Yes?”

“I wish to give her a companion—she has been so sad here, and I believe she’d love a pet.”
The man’s eyes darkened. Few in their party—in the city she knew—were pleased with the current state of the Royal Family.

One day…

“Yes, my lady. This place is not fit for such a gentle soul—what may I do to help?”

“I would like to give her a kitten, something she may love and cherish. I ask you to find me a pregnant tabby, so the kitten is not diseased, and I may choose one of her litter. There should be many around here, but perhaps a black one, to match the colors of her House.” Myra blushed a looked down. “Oh, I feel ridiculous—asking a Knight to hunt cats. I can, of course, look elsewhere if you think it beneath you.”

Ser Redmond immediately shook his head. “My Lady, I would be honored! To please the princess—” he lowered his upon the last word “—would bring me joy. You as well.”

Myra smiled. “Excellent! Keep it a secret, please. Daenerys is so curious, I do not want her to overhear and ruin the surprise.” The man bowed and hurried on his way.

Myra watched him, smile fading, and went to complete the second part of her plan.

Grand Maester Pycelle was in his private room when she found him. The man looked up from his book, surprised.

“My Lady!” he said, voice shrived and wheezing. He struggled to rise.

“Oh! Grand Maester, please don’t rise on my account!” Myra hurriedly came towards him, placing a gentle hand upon his shoulder. She smiled, guilelessly innocent. “You are too important, Maester—and I would not want to tire you with my small needs should your remarkable talent be required by a more significant cause!”

The old man sat, smiling at her indulgently. “My Lady, don’t say such a thing. The brother of the King is an important man. His wife shares that standing.”

She blushed, smiling shyly. “Thank you, Maester Pycelle. In—during the horrible time when the Mad King still lived, I was always in awe of you. Why, the grand Maester! How talented and smart you are—so intimidating for a mere girl like I.”

Myra sat carefully before his desk, openly touching her stomach. Pycelle eyed it knowingly. “I come to you today with a—delicate matter. The Maester we brought from Dragonstone is learned, of course, but he is not the Grand Maester! I would feel so much better with your aid.”

The man puffed his chest. “Of course, my lady! Feel free to tell me anything—I will aid you as best I can.”

She smiled at him, eyes lowered demurely. “Well…you see, I am expecting.”

“Congratulations,” he said automatically.

“Thank you, Grand Maester. My Lord husband is so please.” Then she sighed sadly. “But unlike with my son, I have begun to feel sick in the mornings, and it is simply too humiliating for me to endure! How can a proper Lady show such a horrible thing to her Lord Husband?” She shook her head in shame, and Pycelle nodded knowingly.

Myra continued, “But then I remembered that the former queen would also be plagued by such
nausea, but you would always aid her. I confess, I do not remember how—medicine is not a woman’s place, after all—but I know that your skills always made her feel better. I was hoping you could give me a similar potion. I will pay for it, of course. I know it must be expensive!” Myra looked at him, eyes wide and innocent.

The master smiled. “Of course, child. It’s a common cure. Peachdew, from Pentos. Any master knows of it, and its properties of stopping the sickness. He rose carefully and rummaged through his cabinet, taking out a small flacked filled with a murky, peach-colored liquid. He handed it to her, patting her hand with a smile. “No need to pay—it is quite easy to get a hold of. Now, remember child—only one drop when you feel ill. Only one,” he stated seriously.

Myra felt sick. She smiled through it.

“Thank you, Grand Master! What would the people of King’s Landing do without you?”

She left casually, leaving behind a man with a newly stoked ego, who didn’t think much of the exchange. Once out of sight, Myra opened the flask and sniffed it. The familiar scent of peaches emerged, and she gripped the glass tightly, hand shaking.

She remembered Pycelle, giving this to Queen Rhaella.

When she returned to her rooms—which were rarely used, as she stayed with Stannis—it was only hours before Ser Redmond appeared, a squirming black cat in his arms, and scratches on his face and cheeks.

“Oh Ser, I’m so sorry!” she said, genuinely apologetic.

The man smiled. “She put up quite a fight, my lady. It must mean her kittens will be energetic! Don’t worry, I made sure no one saw me!”

The man carefully placed the cat in the empty hearth, contained behind the fireplace cage. The cat yowled in displeasure and gave him one last scratch before turning away angrily. He hissed.

“You must see Maester Cressen about the wounds! Please, in case they fester.” She’d feel truly horrible then. He nodded in promise and left.

Myra walked slowly to the hearth, looking down at the black tabby, who stared back at her as if she knew.

“Here, My Lady.” Cressen said gently, handing Myra a cup of tea. “You should have told me this before—I have a remedy for the sickness.” Her pregnancy was making her nauseous, and Stannis would look often have to hold her hair back when she awoke in the night and was sick. She hoped this child was out soon—her first baby, she thought in happiness—so that she could get a full nights rest. She felt such empathy for her dear Queen, now that she knew how horrible the sickness was! And Myra did not get sick nearly so often as she had.

She took the cup gratefully and watched as Cressen took out a peach colored liquid. She remembered it, especially it’s strong smell. Grand Maester Pyscelle would often give it to the queen. So this is what it was for. Cressen carefully put a single drop in her tea, and swirled it. He put the potion away.

Myra frowned. “Isn’t that too little?”

He looked surprised. “Are you familiar with Peachdew, My Lady?”
She hesitated—and lied. “Only vaguely.”

“She is miraculous for its ability to stop the sickness, but it, like all other medicines, is a poison. Too much could have very ill effects.”

She stared at him. “And do—is that a common fact?”

“Yes. Peachdew has been extensively studied. Why, even a Maester fresh from the Citadel knows all about it. It’s important, you see—we are responsible for our Ladies’ health during pregnancy.”

Myra took a small bowl, filled with milk, and hesitated briefly. Then, with an apology, she placed four drops into the milk, mixed it, and carefully put it before the cat.

The tabby sniffed—and began to drink.

Now, months later, Myra watched as Daenerys cooed at tiny Ryelle, her newborn daughter which she held carefully in her arms. It had been a fortnight after Stannis had reluctantly left, but the birth had been quick, and Cressen was pleased about both the strength of mother and child. Thus, she’d insisted and he was gone.

Together, the three women—Tyene included—walked with Ser Justin and Ser Redmond through the gardens.

“My Lady, I’ve been meaning to ask,” Ser Redmond began. “About the...gift for the princess?”

Daenerys perked up. “Gift?” she smiled excitedly at Myra. “What gift?”

Myra stopped, and looked her princess in the eyes, smiling sadly. “I was going to give you a kitten, my love. Ser Redmond was so chivalrous and found me a pregnant tammy. Unfortunately, they were all stillborn. The mother barely survived the birth.”

Ser Redmond looked horrified, Tyene and Justin pitying, and tears gathered in Daenerys eyes. “That’s so sad. Those poor kittens.”

Myra kissed her forehead softly, and wiped her tears away. “Yes, my love. But things happen—sometimes we cannot control nature.”

They continued on, the mood more somber, and Myra looked to the sky.

*One day, Your Grace, I will avenge you.*

*And everyone responsible will suffer.*
Wolf's Howl

Chapter Summary

Daenerys gets the truth, Jon arrives home, Ned is enlightened, and Stannis watches a duel.

Chapter Notes

Two exams done!! (well, midterms, really, but they're weighted the same as finals, so...) I've read over 400 textbook pages these past two weeks. It was great hahaha...haha..ha \:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\:\\: One more exam on Monday, and then other stuff, but less demanding! University is FUN.

Anyways, enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Daenerys thought Jamie Lannister was the most beautiful man she’d ever seen. He was also the person who invoked within her the most complicated emotions. She knew him as the golden Kingsguard, the realm’s ‘Kingslayer,’ and the man with the arrogant smile. Daenerys had been nearby a few times when the man’s cutting tongue had castrated some poor servant, or when his skill with a sword had driven his opponent into the dirt of the training yard. There was neither regret nor humility in the man, but in her three years at King’s Landing, he’d tried to be kind to her, alongside Barristan Selmy, the Commander.

Daenerys didn’t know what to make of this lion, who’d killed her father, who she’d come to see as vain and cutting to those ‘lower’ than him, yet whose face would assume a strange, melancholy, far-away gaze whenever their eyes met.

Those first terrible years, she’d ignored him—only seen him as another horrible protector to a mean king. A white knight, who didn’t deserve the pristine color of his suit. Later, she’d learned who he was, and bitterness of his deeds had sprouted. *This man killed my father. This man swore to protect him, but killed him instead*. Would her life have been different, would she still have someone of her House, if Jamie Lannister hadn’t broken his oath?

*Someone who isn’t lost to me across the Narrow Sea.*

But then she’d remember the stories she’d heard of the Mad King—many of whom came from Myra, in the rare moment she was contemplative and melancholy—and she thought that her life may, in fact, have been different had her father lived: but probably not better.

This day, on her way back from lessons with Maester Cressen in the Red Keep’s cavernous library, the young princess came upon Ser Jamie walking towards her, probably making his way to the White Sword Tower at the other end of the Keep. He was in all white; sometimes his armor was
Lannister gold, and other times he wore simpler clothes, to train or participate in some other activity. Despite herself, Daenerys couldn’t help notice the man.

Ser Justin, her sole companion on this day, drew closer, eyes narrowed and laughing-mouth twisted in a rare show of scorn. While her personal guard been much more attentive since the assassination attempt—the perpetrator of which had yet to be caught—his regard for Ser Jamie was more personal than simply protectiveness. Not even the best-tempered member of Stannis’s household could stand the Kingslayer. Very few people could, it seemed, according to the tentative friends she’d found amongst the highborn daughters.

“Although he’s certainly beautiful to look at!” Lady Rilla whispered, conspiratorially. “Women wept when he joined the Kingsguard.”

When Ser Jamie noticed her, his lips immediately stretched into an arrogant, carefree smirk—white teeth flashing insolently. But he couldn’t fully hide the strain in it. He performed a sarcastic bow as she drew nearer, holding the mocking position as she passed, and Ser Justin released an audible exhale of irritation.

Lately, the young lion behaved in this manner whenever she was in his presence. Originally, he’d tried to be tentatively kind, but her constant rebukes had eventually halted his efforts. Now he no longer tried to speak to her, but made it a point to acerbically acknowledge her. The acts irritated Daenerys, and yet…he is never cruel. Not like the others.

Not once had an insult passed through the man’s lips, and she wanted to know why.

“Ser Jamie,” she twisted around, catching the man just as he was rising to turn away. He paused for a moment, still, before turning around with an arrogant brow raised.

“The lady Daenerys speaks—and to me? This is truly a joyful day,” he drawled. “I suppose you’re getting old enough to desire other entertainment. Alas, I am a Kingsguard,” he sighed mournfully, placing his hand upon his heart—the picture of regret.

“You—!” Ser Justin lurched forward, hand going to his sword, but Daenerys halted him with a gentle hand upon his arm. Ser Justin scowled fiercely at the other Knight.

Jamie took a step forward, grinning. “Oh ho, the little pup thinks he can take on a member of the Kingsguard,” Jamie tsked. “Try one of the older men—you may have a chance there. I hear Selmy’s coming down with something,” he informed them helpfully.

Daenerys frowned at the unpleasant man, wondering if she should just continue on. His careless manner, the way he held his chin up and looked down upon the young princess, and his mocking words were all insulting in their own right—but still, she saw the strain upon his smile.

Am I simply imagining it?

Daenerys took a breath and looked the man in the eye, raising her own chin defiantly. She wouldn’t be cowed—not by the cruel slurs of the other residents, or the hateful look of some of the servant—and certainly not by a mocking Lannister!

“You killed my father,” she said with feigned coolness, watching him. For an instant, his smile slipped and genuine shock flashed across his features. Even Ser Justin jerked his head toward her, and she saw similar surprise from the corner of his eyes. But she kept her gaze locked on the Lion. Ser Jamie recovered quickly, but she didn’t miss the hard way he swallowed.

“Well,” he drawled, “They don’t call me the Kingslayer for nothing.” Although the words were
casually stated, there was bitterness behind them. “Come to demand my head? Unfortunately, I quite like it where it is. I wouldn’t be nearly so pretty without it, and then what would the women do?”

He said every word with feigned remorse, as if he would give up his head, but it’s presence on his body served some greater purpose. She decided this acerbic man wasn’t quite so bad—if he could still find humor in this place—twisted though it was.

He may perhaps be the only person less popular than she was. She’d seen the looks the other White Cloaks sent him, and the whispers of the servant whenever he was near. I may have been born with a hated name—but Jamie Lannister earned his.

“I wanted to ask you why you killed him,” Daenerys said simply, looking up at him. Was it foolish to feel some sort of bond with this person—one of mutual isolation?

For endless moments, Jamie stared at her, smile gradually slipping until it was gone. “Why?” he repeated; like it was a foreign word. He snorted, “How is it that the daughter of the man I murdered is the first person to ask me that question?” There was a wealth of bitterness hidden under his smiles, she saw. Perhaps it was guilt that drove him to try and be kind to her.

“I’ve heard many stories about you,” she said somberly. “How you killed him from behind, like a coward, how you sat on the Throne until Lord Stark arrived, and didn’t want to give it up. How you are self-serving and broke your oath so that the new King wouldn’t kill you, or send you to the Wall. That you don’t deserve to be a member of the Kingsguard, because only honorable men should wear the white cloak.” That last bit she rolled her eyes at—honorable wasn’t a word she’d apply to many of the Kingsguard. “They say you are treacherous and care only for yourself. That nobody should trust you at his back, because you’d abandon anyone to save yourself.”

He just stared at her, smile long gone and green eyes hollow. “And you aren’t convinced? You want me to prove how horrible I am? I’m afraid you’ll have to tell me how. Shall I go murder an infant? Or perhaps beat some maid for not serving me the right type of wine? How may this lowly Knight serve you, my princess?” There was scorn and defiance in his voice, but also resignation. This strange man, who was so much larger, stronger, and scarier than she was. Daenerys didn’t think that he held the power in this discussion.

The girl contemplated him, “When I was five, on Dragonstone, I overheard the cook and a new maid talking about another maid, who’d disappeared.” Ser Jamie blinked, frowning at her in bemusement. She continued carefully, “They said that Lady Myra had ordered the girl flogged and then dismissed her, because the maid had been spreading horrible rumors about me. I’d was shocked—but immediately denied that it was possible. Myra was good you see—and good people don’t hurt others.”

Both men stared at her, this young girl who spoke with such passion.

“But here, I learned that that’s not true: everyone hurts others. I wanted to hurt the people who hurt me—and everyone around them—but I think I am a good person. I learned many things in this place, but I think the most important is that people aren’t ‘good’ or ‘bad’—but that everyone is both. And everyone can hurt others. It took me a long time to understand that, and to understand that Myra hurt that girl to protect me.” Daenerys never looked away from his crystal green eyes, and Jamie swallowed with difficulty. “I think my father was someone with a lot of bad in him, so I think I can understand people wanting him gone. I hated you for doing it, perhaps I still do and I can never forgive you…but I understand what he was. It hurts me, just like the death of my mother and older brother hurt me—because they were of my blood, and now I am alone.”

Guilt bloomed on his golden features, and Ser Jamie looked away. But Daenerys didn’t want pity
—she wanted to understand.

“Maester Cressen told me about the Rebellion. When you killed the king, the city was already falling—you could have just found a place to wait until someone else did something. I thought and thought, but unless you really hated him, why would you kill him? And after, why did you stay instead of escaping? No one would have known.”

These thoughts had been spinning in her mind for months, and it felt liberating to finally say them. “People say a lot of horrible things about me, so now I don’t believe them when they say horrible things about other people. And you, unlike many, have been kind to me. So, I ask again; you killed my father. Why?”

Jamie stared at her as if he’d never seen her—or anyone—ever before. She could see his heart pounding in his neck, and once again he swallowed.

When his mouth opened, nothing came out. He snapped it shut and cleared his throat, running his shaking fingers through his hair. Daenerys thought he suddenly looked much smaller. How much of Jamie Lannister was simply bravado? Was that his protective mask—just as hers was cool arrogance?

Finally, Ser Jamie spoke, and the voice that came out was different than any he’d ever used. Daenerys thought this was probably the first time he’d shed his mask in a very long time. “He was going to kill them. Everyone—the whole city. He was going to kill them…and I killed him instead. I didn’t keep my oath to him—but I kept a more important one. I won’t say it wasn’t self-serving in part…but I did it for others. Because I’d failed to protect…everyone else.” He looked away, partly defiant—unwilling to hope. “You don’t have to believe me.”

Daenerys felt her heart pound, denial on her tongue, and her stomach was twisting horribly. *Walk away. Don’t ask. Leave.* She couldn’t. “How…how would he have…?”

Jamie’s lips twisted in a pained smiled, and for many moments, he didn’t speak. But then it was as if the words were ripped from his lips—held captive for so many years. “Wildfire. His pyromancers had hidden enough to raze King’s Landing to the ground. He was going to ignite it all.”

The words were a punch to the gut—the most painful thing she’d experienced in the capital. Ser Justin sucked in a shocked breath. “That’s impossible,” her Knight denied. “No one—no one would have…There was never any word of wildfire!”

Jamie remained silent, raising his chin.

The men stared at each other for many moments—and then Ser Justin looked away. “It’s impossible,” he whispered.

My father was a monster. A monster...

The last bit of hope in her soul was crushed, the belief that perhaps the years had somehow—somehow—skewed the stories. How could her father have been…evil? But if Ser Jamie’s story was true…She felt as if she couldn’t breathe.

“Thank you for telling me,” Daenerys whispered, voice shaking. Tears were dripping down her face. “Thank you for…stopping him.”

The shocked relief on his face was aweing. Then it slowly shifted into painful regret. “I shouldn’t have—told you. It’s…you shouldn’t have to…”
She shook her head. Daenerys wouldn’t run from painful truths. But at eight-years-old, a part of her wished she could have remained ignorant for a while longer.

She just wanted to retreat to her room and cry. She wanted Myra to hug and soothe her. She wanted cousin Stannis to come back and to sit on his lap and feel his large body protecting her. Nothing could get past Stannis Baratheon.

“I’m—excuse me.”

Jamie Lannister nodded, once, and then bowed deeply. For the first time, there was no hint of mocking in his actions. He held that pose until she left.

*****

After nearly a month on the road with Stannis Baratheon, Jon felt he could finally breathe normally in the man’s presence. The first days had felt like the Lord’s very gaze was heavy as iron—but Jon began to understand that Stannis simply stared at everything with the same heavy assessment. No action, for the Lord of Dragonstone, was purposeless. He wasted no time on things like niceties, or intrigues, or benign cruelties. Jon could understand why so many people found the man unpleasant—he didn’t indulge their games.

Stannis was a man that would tell you to your face if he thought you were a fool. And then he’d tell you what to do to correct the behavior.

No man like that would ever be popular—although Ser Orys was a strange contradiction.

Jon had fought against the sneering Knight that second day at White Harbor, under the watchful eyes of Benjen, Stannis and his loyal men, and Lord Manderly and his heir. By the end of the demonstration, everyone stared at Jon as if he’d done something amazing. The shy boy had lost to the Knight, as expected, and was breathing hard.

But Ser Orys was similarly winded.

Everyone stared, and the Manderly’s were evaluating Jon with a newfound interest. Ser Wendel Manderly, who’d offered to make Jon his squire, seemed genuinely impressed. His father more begrudgingly so, but he hid it behind enthusiastic laudations. Ser Orys had given Jon a brief pat on the shoulder.

Stannis had simply nodded. “Good.”

Jon’s pride had mixed uncomfortably with his fear of the man.

Stannis had done the exact same thing after the Maester’s evaluation. Jon was worried that he’d grow attached to the sensation of pleasing the somber Lord.

For him part, Benjen hadn’t stopped grinning the whole day. His happiness had drawn a wan smile from Jon, who was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

But it never had—Stannis Baratheon had never mentioned his bastardy, expect in a passing manner that was meant to convey fact, but not opinion. Jon tried to kill the kernel of hope that was growing in his chest.

*He has no choice—the king is forcing him to marry me to his ward. Stannis is not a man to openly show his scorn…*
The hope wouldn’t die, even as every day on the road, the unopened letter from Daenerys Targaryen burned a hole in his breast pocket. He was too terrified of losing it to put it anywhere else, but too terrified of opening it.

*Perhaps Stannis may not...be openly cruel, but she is a southern woman.*

They’d parted ways with Ser Orys at Moat Cailin, after a full day spent escorting Stannis around the construction, the other five architects competing to inform the lord of their achievements. He was as similarly brisk with them as with anyone. Jon didn’t know what the man thought of the Moat, and he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

No one but Ser Orys or Ser Davos initiated conversation with the hard Lord. But over the course of the month, as Stannis watched him, Jon became more comfortable asking the man simple questions about King’s Landing and Dragonstone.

He never asked about Daenerys, and Stannis never volunteered information. *Why am I such a coward?*

Finally, their party of ten men, plus Jon and Benjen, approached the imposing grey walls Winterfell. The familiar tension was building, especially since he knew that Benjen and Stannis would inform his father that Jon had lied to him. And then things would change, and Jon didn’t want any of that.

He didn’t want to be responsible for ruining everything.

However, the Winterfell they found was a very different place. Unfamiliar servants scurried around, unfamiliar guards protected the gates, and when the family, his father and siblings, greeted them at the gate—Lady Catelyn was absent.

And everyone was somber.

*****

Ned Stark sat in a study with Benjen and Stannis Baratheon, where they’d gone immediately after their arrival. Jon was sent to his rooms to bathe and change, instructed to come to the training yard within the hour. The pale boy had looked at Eddard with regret, although it should be Ned that was remorseful. Benjen’s angry information only confirmed what Ned already knew. Stannis remained silent, but he could feel the man’s irritation.

For years, Ned had been kept ignorant of what went on in his own home, and he felt sick every time he remembered.

*I didn’t pay attention, Lyanna. I failed you and your son.*

After Jon and Benjen had set off for Moat Cailin, Ned had careful begun his own investigation into his household. A third of the servants were now gone, and Catelyn was confined to her room until he decided on a course of action. She’d been pleading and then angry, but he’d refused all her attempts to speak with him. He’d tired his best, all these years, to accommodate her. No woman should be faced with infidelity, with the shame, and so he’d given into her too many times. He’d let his guilt blind him, and his complacency had inspired the servants.

He’d never suspected a thing. The Honorable Ned Stark was perhaps...too honorable.

“They’d give him smaller meals if he proved to be better than Robb,” Ned told the men, defeated. “Then, when he’d stopped doing that, they simply did it at random—to be cruel. Sometimes they wouldn’t wash his sheets for months, nor his clothes. Other small, painful things like refusing to
tackle his horse unless Robb was present, or ignoring his requests. Belittlement, scorn...probably other small acts intended to beat him down. Perhaps other things that they’d never admit to, things that I’ll never know of but can endlessly imagine.”

Ned slumped, head in his hands. “Catelyn knew. She denies ordering them to do so, but she knew. And she didn't stop them—some of the more dedicated servants, she would reward. Ignoring him, I could understand...but not this. And Jon never told me. He didn’t believe that I would...” Ned shook his head, heart heavy. He felt as if it was once again those early years, right after the Rebellion. “Gods, I love her. I love her, as the mother of my children, as my Lady. But I can never trust her again.”

Stannis released a slow breath. “She undermined you in your own Keep, Eddard. Actions must be punished. Even if they're your wife’s.”

Benjen concurred. He had no problem believing Catelyn’s actions, although he was somber in a show of regret for his brother’s pain.

“How? How can I punish my own wife for being cruel to a bastard? The North wouldn’t understand...they’d probably take her side in the matter. How can I be a Lord and a Father at the same time?”

The men were silent for a long while, then Stannis said. “You must decide which is more important—the lord, or the father.”

And so, Ned made the selfish choice.

*****

Stannis stood on the balcony overlooking the training yard, waiting beside Ned and Benjen, as Catelyn Stark was escorted towards them. She looked like she hadn’t slept in days, and her auburn hair was in disarray.

“Ned—” she tried, but the man held up his hand, unable to look at her. Stannis hoped to never be in the same position.

Beneath them, Jon Snow and young Robb Stark, a copy of his mother in looks, stood with swords in their hands. Robb stared at his brother, while the skinny boy stared at the flood. Stannis couldn’t see his face, but the heir to Winterfell looked in denial.

Servants and guards lingered in the doorways, watching the spectacle. A grim man with a long grey beard had his arms crossed nearby. Ser Rodrik, Stannis assumed—the Master-at-arms.

“Well, and here I'd begun to think Winterfell was the most unpleasant place on earth. Seem's like there's some entertainment after all.”

Perplexed at the heavy southern accent, Stannis and his company turned around. A dark-skinned Dornishman came to stand beside him, carelessly watching the courtyard as if his very presence wasn’t shocking. He had long black hair, insolently loose in the wind, with streaks of silver intertwining. The man turned to Stannis with a quicksilver smile, venom in every muscle. “Baratheon. How’s the king? Still murdering babes?”

Stannis jerked his gaze to Ned, as did Benjen, for once the two men were equally astonished. Ned Stark closed his eyes in defeat. “Prince Oberyn Martell arrived just a few days before you did. He’s here to—”
“Explore the North,” the Red Viper drawled. “The only Kingdom I’ve ignored. I was beginning to regret the decision—I should have just returned to Essos, the climate is more forgiving and the women more passionate—but now I see I’ve arrived just in time for a spectacle.” He leaned back against the banister, carelessly relaxed in his colorful clothes, so at odds with the Northmen. A bejeweled dagger flashed at his belt. “A bastard and the heir—how interesting.”

Stannis started at him, unconvinced by the casual words. Then he turned to Ned, but the other Lord seemed determined to deal with this new problem after he dealt with his wife. Stannis did not begrudge him, but they had much to talk about.

Was the Viper, famous for his restlessness, truly here on a whim—or was Dorne making some move? Stannis couldn’t tell—the southernmost Kingdom and its strange people and customs were as alien as the Free Cities.

Ned stepped closer to the banister. Jon had looked up, staring at the Prince with wide eyes. Martell looked back at the boy with a half-smirk. Stannis felt a chill.

“You will spar,” Ned instructed his sons. “No holding back, and will give it your all. I will see, everyone will see, the true talents of both my son.”

Jon looked miserable, eyes flashing between his father, Robb, and the Lady Catelyn, who stood with her hands clasped before him, giving him a scowling look. Stannis was honestly surprised at the hatred on her face. Was this common, or was the Lady Catelyn unique in her passionate abhorrence?

What would Myra do, should Stannis ever bring home a bastard?

Oberyn Martell glanced at the Lady and whistled low in interest. Stannis clenched his teeth, extremely uncomfortable with the lounging man’s presence.

“Father—” Jon tried, beseechingly.

Ned remained unmoved. “No holding back, Jon. I will see how blind I’ve been all these years.”

Robb looked at his mother, denial on his face. He turned to his brother. “Come on, then. I want to know too.”

Jon reluctantly took up a position mirroring his brother’s. Stannis stepped forward. “Honesty, Jon Snow.”

The skinny child clenched his eyes shut tightly, before setting his face in resolve. He adjusted his position—crouching a bit lower, feet in a slightly different position, and sword grip slightly lower. Robb looked started, and Ser Rodrik blinked at Jon’s modifications.

Oberyn Martell released an interested sound.

At Ser Rodrik’s command, they began to spar.

It lasted mere moments.

It ended with Robb on the ground, his sword knocked aside, and Jon’s blade at his throat. Silence engulfed the courtyard. Ned gripped the banister with bloodless fingers, Benjen sighed, Catelyn was pale as snow…and Oberyn Martell slowly smiled.

For a moment, both boys were silent, and then Robb’s face twisted with anguish. He looked to his mother, pained, and then back to his brother. “It’s true. Mother really—she…Why didn’t you tell me,
Jon! Why!"

The other boy stepped away, pale. His dark hair covered his eyes. “She’s your mother,” he said quietly. “I couldn’t…”

“And you’re my brother!” Robb yelled, anguished. “But you didn’t trust me!”

He threw his arms down angrily, and strode away, disappearing into the Keep. An older boy detached from the crowd, following him and glancing at Jon with narrowed eyes.

The small boy was alone in the middle of the courtyard, under dozens of somber eyes. He hunched into himself.

Ned released a slow breath. “The Lady Catelyn will be leaving Winterfell and visiting her family in Riverrun. She will return…at a later time.”

“Ned!” Catelyn protested, surging forward to drip his tunic. “You can’t do this! You can’t!”

The Lord of Winterfell remained unmoved. “I love you, Catelyn. But I love my son, as well. And you tried to beat him down, tried to drive a wedge between our sons, and made my heir dangerously overconfident. Something that ruins men. And you’ve humiliated me in in front of my household and the North.”

Catelyn’s face twisted in rage. “Son! Son! He is a bastard, Ned! A bastard—a threat to our children and grandchildren! One day he’ll return and take Winterfell! Why don’t you understand! How can you be so blind!”

“Enough!” Ned roared, jerking away from her. He turned to the guard. “Escort the Lady to her room. She leaves in the morning.”

Catelyn paled, resisting as a man stepped forward and carefully insisted she leave. “You can’t do this,” she whispered. “You can’t—what about the children? You can’t separate me from my children, Ned. They need me!” she begged, desperate. Her face flushed red in protest, voice resonating through the Keep. “Ned, please!”

Stannis sighed in pity.

“A wet nurse and septa will care for them until you return,” Ned said, voice aged and hollow. “When that will be…I don’t know.”

Catelyn was led away, pleading all the while, regret bleeding from her. Ned closed his eyes, looking away.

Just when Stannis thought the silence would never end, Oberyn Martell shocked them all and vaulted over the balcony.

The Dornishman landed down below in a cat’s crouch, just meters from the young boy. Jon jerked away in shock, eyes huge, and the onlookers gasped. Ned opened his mouth, speechless. Even Stannis was astonished.

Bloody hells, what now?

The Viper slithered towards Jon, circling him with interest. The wary boy followed him, twisting around.
“Untutored, and yet still so skilled. You adapted the stance to suit your height, weight, and strength—all without instruction. You learn from watching and master the movements quickly. Such talent.”

the Prince murmured, smiling slowly.

The Viper leaned down, nearly nose to nose with the wary boy, and said, “I see your mother’s blood in you, boy.”

Ned Stark’s face lost all color.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, the letter is next chapter! Can you guess who’s going to goad Jon into reading it? >:)

Dany has opinions....lol
Viper's Venom

Chapter Summary

Ned and Stannis confront the Viper, and Jon get's advice.

Chapter Notes

So, I didn't plan to write this today, but the studying just wasn't happening, I felt kinda bad of the mini-cliffhanger last chapter, and I received such nice pledges of fealty :) Enjoy!

And no other update till after Monday :)

Ned Stark watched as Oberyn Martell glided indolently into the room, his ever-present smile—a thing that conveyed no amusement—stretched his full lips. He scanned the room in interest, taking in the three men present. Beside Ned, Stannis sat, grim and straight-backed, his elbows upon the arms of his chair, fingers pressed together on the desk. To the right wall, Benjen stood, eyes watchful as if, like his namesake, the Viper would strike. Ned didn't miss how Ben’s fingers tapped in pommel in aggregation.

“Truly, a gathering of great men,” the Viper murmured, sitting with a flourish upon the chair before the desk. He threw one leg over the other, and one arm behind the back of the chair, and lounging as if he were at home, and they were the guests. “Well,” he glances at Ben “Two and a half, men.”

Ben glared but didn’t respond. Oberyn was a Prince—and he was allowed much that other men weren’t. Ned still pressed his lips together.

“Why are you here?” Stannis asked, no patience for games.

The Dornishman raised a brow. “How abrupt, Baratheon. If we are sharing life stories, why don’t you start? Why are you here? I’m sure it is fascinating.”

Stannis didn’t react, but his jaw clenched tighter.

“My lord—” Ned began.

“’Prince,’” Oberyn interrupted, grinning. “I know the North is a barbarous place, but do remember your formalities. Lord Stark.”

Ned had never wanted to hit a man more than at that moment. The Viper was treating this as some amusement, just as he’d treated his announcement of Jon’s Mother before all of Winterfell.

“I see your mother’s blood in you, boy,” the man had announced, nearly stopping Ned’s heart, before he’d casually turned and left. Jon had stared after him, immobile, before looking at Ned with
huge eyes.

Ned hadn’t been able to do much more than quickly leave, Stannis and Benjen behind. Guilt and terror threatened to swamp him. Stannis had been casting him assessing looks ever since, and Ben was nearly as pallid as Ned felt.

*What do you know, Martell!* Ned wanted to scream, but he felt as if he’d be playing right into the man’s trap. After everything that had happened this day, Ned simply wanted to retreat to the God’s Wood and spend the rest of the day praying.

He didn’t think he could deal with Catelyn’s departure any other way.

“Prince Oberyn,” Ned said through clenched teeth. “I have welcomed you into my home—”

“Wonderful place it is,” Oberyn drawled. “So…colourful. And the amusements are certainly *interesting.*” The man leaned forward with a smile. “Your bastard son had piqued my interest, Stark. A shame you’re allowing his talent to be wasted.”


“A skill like that is difficult to nurture, *especially* for a regular master-at-arms. And *yours* seems to have missed it entirely.” Oberyn’s smile was terrible. “Well, that’s what happens to a bastard in the North—they’re *ignored.*”

Ned felt the words like a punch to the gut.

“*Challenge,*” Oberyn said, fiercely. “That boy needs a *challenge.* Not play-fighting in a yard.” A beat of silence, and then the man relaxed, smiling carelessly. “Well, good luck finding a proper place to foster him.”

*I have no interest*’ his tone seemed to say.

“Make your intentions clear, Martell. What are you after?” Stannis asked, coolly.


The room was silent, everyone nonplused, until the man continued, casually, “Eventually, that is. Against the many, many men who have wronged me,” he signed, despondent. “This one sellsword from Tyrosh once stole a beautiful whore I was perusing. To think, I could have had another daughter; one can never have enough *family.* I still have not found the slippery shit. Ah well, a man has to have goals.”

Stannis clenched his hands together before him, looking as if he would like nothing more than to run the man through. Ned felt a headache coming on. These types of answers are why he’d given up trying to speak to Oberyn days ago.

“In *Winterfell,*” Stannis bit out. “Why are you *here?*”

“Well,” the viper said, blinking as if it were obvious. “it was here, and so was I. How tedious your life must be, Baratheon, to always need a *reason* for your actions.” Oberyn shook his head as if in pity. “I am Oberyn Martell—I was bored, and I came North.”

“Why did you mention Jon’s mother?” Ned finally forced out, unable to hold the words in any longer. Humiliating desperation tinged them.
Everyone stared at him, and he immediately regretted the words. The Viper’s lips stretched wider.

*Others take me.*

“Ah hah, is that what this meeting is about? I do not care about some small family drama—I have enough bastards of my own, Stark, the history of yours is not that interesting. I simply was admiring his skill,” he shrugged “it is so like his uncle’s, after all.”

Ned felt his heart beating in his chest. “Which—” he licked his lips, aware that Stannis had turned to regard him with narrowed eyes—“which uncle?”

The Viper raised his brows. “Well, certainly not that one,” Oberyn tilted his chin at Benjen, who scowled. “I can understand your reluctance, Stark. Of course, you wouldn’t wish anyone to know of it—all the drama it could stir. Why, what would our dear King think?”

Ned could hear a rushing noise in his ears. *He know. He knows! But how—I never—only Benjen!*

Gods Robert would *kill* Jon!

“To learn that his father killed his uncle and drove his mother to suicide—any boy would be traumatized. And how would our dear King react knowing the boy has Dornish blood—when he scorns us so?”


*Ashara!*

“You think—”

“Ned!” Benjen snapped, and the Lord of Winterfell immediately bit off the words.

Oberyn watched the exchanged with interest, plans spinning in his eyes. “Hmmm. Unless there is some other truth you are hiding, Lord Stark?”

Stannis was frowning severely, watching Ned carefully with narrowed eyes.

“Ashara Dayne,” Stannis mused, carefully. “You killed her brother, returned Dawn to the family, and then returned months later to King’s Landing with Jon Snow. The time line makes sense, especially if you met her prior to finding your sister.”

*No—no I cannot dishonor her memory—*

“The boy shall find out eventually,” Oberyn said, shrugging. “Especially when he goes out into the world and you can no longer suppress the rumours. He’ll put it together, as will many others. I, for one, remember Harrenhal.”

“So, there is no other motive for your presence?” Stannis asked, pointedly. “Jon Snow is betrothed to my Ward, and will be Lord of a powerful Keep.”

“A Keep in the North,” Oberyn said, dismissively. “And betrothed to a Targaryen—Dorne may have made peace with the Kingdoms, but we did not forget what the Dragon, Lion, and Stag did to us,” Oberyn bit out. “We have no interest in your petty intrigues. My brother had made our position clear, and I obey my Prince.”

For a heartbeat, the tension remained, and then Stannis broke eye contact with the man.
Ned exhaled, a weight lifted off his shoulder. Yes—the Dornish scorned the other six Kingdom’s equally: they kept to themselves. Prince Doran had pardoned the Crown for the tragedy done to his sister, and all these years there was only peace between them. Oberyn’s presence here probably was simply a whim—the man had traveled everywhere, done many things, and none had ever had a purpose.

Ned had more important things to contemplate than the amusements of a prince.

He nodded. “Excuse our rudeness, Prince Oberyn. Things have been tense.”

The man shrugged casually and stood. “Your wife is an interesting character, Lord Stark.”

With that final remark, the cutting prince left. Ned stared after him, hoping the man grew bored of Winterfell soon and found his amusements elsewhere. Preferable out of the North.

“That is a dangerous man,” Stannis murmured, turning to Ned. “Watch your son, Stark.”

Ned blinked. “You heard him, he has no interest in any of this.”

“The Viper is likely just entertaining himself,” Ben muttered, coming to sit in the prince’s empty chair, slumping tiredly. “Mentioning Jon’s mother, and in front of the whole Keep, was only a game to him.”

Stannis stood. “Perhaps—or he’s playing another game entirely.”

The Lord retreated to the door. “I have correspondence to attend to, Stark. But be wary.”

Right before leaving, Stannis hesitated, and looked over his shoulder, face hard. “Hear me, Stark.” Ned jolted, reminded of that night at Robert’s last feast, all those years ago. “If whatever secret you’re keeping endangers my Ward, then I will go to any lengths to keep her safe. Robert’s will be damned.”

He left, shutting the door after him, Ned and Benjen gaping.

“Was—did he just threaten treason?” Ben whispered. “Stannis Baratheon? Over a Targaryen ward?”

Ned sighed, rubbing his temples. “Ward he may call her, but he thinks of her as his daughter. I don’t know what he would do—he’s as unpredictable as the Viper, at times. Gods, Ben. All this—how was I to predict all this? I wish I had just brought Jon directly home—and there would be no correspondence with the Lord of Dragonstone, no tension in my household, no strain between Robert and I. Gods, life would have been easier.”

Benjen came closer, and clasped brother on the shoulder. “Perhaps for you, Ned. But then Jon would have no future—and I would probably have perished at the Wall.”

Ned looked at him dully. “Do you think Stannis is right—is the Viper after something?”

Ben hesitated. “Jon has always—wanted, Ned. Although he hides it, the boy wants to know his mother, his past. Oberyn Martell may make use of his desire, if Jon is his goal. But if we told him…”

“I can’t tell him the truth, Ben,” Ned rebuked firmly. “You know that.”

“I don’t know that, Ned,” Ben responded, beseechingly. “Why can you not tell him? What harm could it do? Tell him of Lyanna—let him know his mother.”
“Lyanna isn’t the problem, Ben,” Ned hissed, turning away. “It’s his father. His name. I love my son—but I cannot tolerate a threat to my King.”

Ben reeled away, shocked. “Ned! You don’t actually think Jon would—no. No, Jon doesn’t want power, and you know that! You just don’t want him to resent you,” Ben accused. “For lying to him all these years, for making him suffer.”

Ned surged to his feet, “Whatever the reason—Jon will never know! Lyanna’s son will never get tangled in this bloody game—no rebellion will ever plague this land because of the choices I made. Do I make myself clear?”

After several tense heartbeats, Benjen looked away.

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After the Dornishman’s shocking words, Jon had been unable to move for many moments. Slowly, the courtyard cleared, but there he remained, the words playing over and over in his head.

“Your mother’s blood…”

Mother. His mother. Did…did that man know who she was? How could his skills with a sword ever reval such a thing? Or perhaps she’d been a warrior woman, like those on Bear Island.

But what does a dornishman known of Bear Island.

Jon didn’t know where to turn—what to do. He wanted to go to Robb; he wanted to avoid Robb. He wanted to speak to his father; he wanted to stay far away form the man. He wanted to read the bloody letter he’d stashed in his room; he was terrified of the words.

Finally, overwhelmed, Jon had retreated to his chamber. He decided that he would do nothing. He spent hours in there, just recuperating from the shock of the day.

So much had happened—Lady Catelyn was getting sent away. He was grateful to his father, but he also hated himself for it. He was responsible for his sibling’s losing their mother, for his father losing his wife. Robb already hated him—Sansa would too. Arya and Bran would follow, when they were old enough to understand. His father would grow to resent him.

Gods, I should have lost!

But Stannis Baratheon had been watching—and for once in his life, Jon Snow wanted to prove himself worthy of the future that had just be handed to him.

A keep, children, a highborn wife. More than any bastard deserves.

He didn’t want to hold himself back anymore. It had never gotten him anything, anyway. Jon wanted to be brave—he wanted to change. He wanted Stannis Baratheon to watch him and say ‘Good.’ Because his talent was the only thing that had never been given to him, the only thing he could call his own.

“I see your mother’s blood in you, boy.”

“Was my mother…brave?” Jon whispered. “Would she have been proud of me today?”

Jon wanted to know her. In his most secret dreams, those he only contemplated at night in the safety of his bed, he pictured a beautiful, kind woman who would hug him close and love him. During
those moments his rational mind was silenced, and his emotions held the reign. During those heartbeats, Jon felt wanted.

“I want to be brave.”

He grabbed the letter from his nightstand, staring at the Dragon on the seal, and reached down to open it.

And stopped, heart pounding. He stared, willing his hand to move. It’s just a letter, Jon Snow! Open it!

But he couldn’t.

Surging to his feet, Jon took the letter with him to the Weirwood, hoping the Old Gods would grant him some courage—or at least accompany him in his cowardice. He could excuse himself before them, at least.

He sat against the white wood, holding the letter in his lap, aware of the paper as if it was heavy as iron.

When he opened that letter, he could allow no more illusions. He’d finally know what his future would be like—and Jon wanted to fool himself for a few years more.

“You are the most brooding child I have ever seen—and I have traveled the world.”

Jon jumped, looking around, but no one was there.

“Up here, boy.”

Jon looked up, astonished to see Oberyn Martell lounging casually on one of the Weirwood blanched.

“You can’t lay there!” Jon gasped, appalled.

Oberyn, on his stomach with his head rested on his palm, raised a brow. “And yet, I am. I’m sure your Gods will smite me at any moment.”

Jon frowned severely. “This is my Lord Father’s Keep—you have to show him respect.”

The man stared down at him, and Jon eventually looked to his feet, feeling colour flushing his cheeks.

I just commanded a prince…am I an idiot?

The man landed beside him, startling Jon and reminding him of that afternoon.

Your mother’s blood.

Perhaps you are right, brooding boy. Were we in Dorne, I would challenge such a disrespectful guest to a duel—or perhaps invite him for a drink. Who is to say, in the heat of the moment?”

He grinned, flashing startlingly white teeth, and sat casually beside Jon, looking perfectly at ease.

Jon squirmed, looking around. Should he…leave? But Oberyn didn’t seem to mind his presence.

“Tell me, did you train yourself to fight? The master-at-arms seemed surprised.”
Jon was startled that the man wanted to talk to him. “I—after Ser Rodrik shows us the maneuvers, I
would come here and work through them myself. Sometimes, if I didn’t like how a position felt, I
would—alter it, just a bit.”

“Hmmmm—learning by trial and error. An experienced teacher would have been able to show you
how to best use your stature. Was yours not experienced, or simply not as invested in your
education?”

Jon flushed, looking away. Ser Rodrik did pay Robb more attention, but that was only natural. He
was the heir.

*He pays attention to Theon, too…*

Jon banished the ungrateful thought. At least Ser Rodrik wasn’t cruel. So what if he was a bit
inattentive?

“I see.” Oberyn mused, having watched Jon’s face. “You know, I have seven bastard daughters.”
Jon gaped. “And an eighth on the way. No sons, but oh well—daughters are more loving. I would
not trade any of them. My eldest, Obara, is an expert with a spear and whip—she would quickly get
rid of an unsatisfying teacher. I am very proud,” the man smiled.

Jon was astounded. “You—but she’s a bastard! And—and a woman.”

Oberyn snorted. “Dorne does not care about such petty things. My daughters are known as the Sand
Snakes—and beloved of their people. We are not so barbaric as the North. My mother was Princess
of Dorne—a ruler, not simply a consort. My Niece will be Princess as well, one day.”

*Beloved of their people.* Bastards, beloved? Was he telling the truth?

Jon was fascinated—he knew nothing about Dorne. “You—you really don’t care if someone is a
bastard?”

“I, personally? No. And my brother, the Prince, loves my daughters well. I myself am in love with
the magnificent Ellaria Sand—as I said, Dorne is not as barbaric as the rest of the Kingdoms. We do
not punish children for their parents’ deeds.”

Jon sat there, staring sightlessly, wondering about this strange other world. Part of him wanted to
deny it—it was such an alien idea. Surely the man was lying, but…what is he wasn’t? What would
Dorne be like? Jon had lived in cold, grey Winterfell his whole life—learning about only the things
that would aid him in running his future Keep. The cultures of far-away Kingdoms were never part
of the curriculum.

*I loved traveling to Moat Cailin. I think…I think I want to travel more.*

“Your mother would have been the same, I’m sure.”

Jon almost broke his own neck, with how fast he returned his gaze to Oberyn, shocked at the casual
words. “My…my mother?” Jon whispered. “Do you really…?”

Oberyn raised an interested brow. “You really do not have any idea. Well, I cannot say I do not
understand.”

Jon shook his head, desperate. “Please—please, who…?”

“The Lady Ashara Dayne was her name. A Dornish beauty—your father met her at the tourney at
Harrenhal. The rumours say he fell in love with her at once, and I remember their faces as they danced, so I would believe it. She is the only one who could have been your mother, the only one who would tempt Eddard Stark to break his oath. Furthermore, he went south without a child, but returned with you.”

Ashara…Ashara Dayne.

‘Was her name’…she’s dead, then.

“Did—did you know her?” Jon asked, chest tight, mourning a woman he didn’t even know. Did she die having him? Is that why…is that why she hadn’t kept him?

“When I was young, my Mother took my…sister and I around the Kingdoms. We stopped at Starfall. Lady Dayne was only ten at the time, but fierce and growing into her beauty. Your pretty face makes sense, if you think about it. She and my sister were dear friends—both hot blooded Dornish women, who would not care about having a bastard boy.”

Jon felt like he would cry. He asked Oberyn many questions, and the man told him the of Harrenhal, of Ashara’s position as Princess Elia’s lady, of her meeting with his father. Ned had been forced to wed Catelyn Tully to further an alliance.

He would have wed Ashara…if he could have.

Jon felt as if a giant weight had been lifted from his shoulder, as if the world finally made sense, until Oberyn said, “This is all speculation, of course. I cannot for sure say if she was your mother—only Lord Stark and those at Starfall would truly know.”

“Father…he’s never spoken of her.”

“No, but it is understandable, after all that occurred.” And then Oberyn Martell told Jon Snow of Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, and how his father had killed him. And the aftermath, including his mother’s suicide.

She lost the man she loved, her friends, and her brother all in one year…she couldn’t handle it.

Jon Snow felt endless pity for the woman—and sorrow that she may have chosen death over the son of the man who so wronged her.

No…his father would never speak of her.

But perhaps there were people at Starfall who…remembered the truth?

Jon felt as if he were standing at crossroads—and that the path he took could never be unchosen.

“Now, enough about the past. Tell me, broody boy, what is this?”

Jon glanced up, just in time to see Oberyn pluck the forgotten letter from his lap. Jon instinctively tried to reach for it, a protest on his lips, but it was too late.

“Oh ho, the Targaryen sigil. Your betrothed, I assume? And yet, unopened. Expecting bad news?”

Oberyn raised a brow when Jon’s face flushed crimson. He snatched the letter back, previous thoughts forgotten, and scowled at the Prince. Oberyn smiled innocently in response.

“Come, are we not friends now?”
Jon blinked in surprise. *Friends?*

“Tell me, what is it about this letter that causes you to hold it so carefully, and yet so far away from yourself?”

Jon blinked down, surprised to see that he *was* in fact holding the parchment at arms length. Flushing at being so obvious, he quickly brought it back, nearly *pouting* at Oberyn. The man’s grin widened.

“That is… I’ve never met her. Daenerys Targaryen. She sent me this letter, and…” Gods, this was mortifying.

“And after your experiences with the Lady of Winterfell, you expect scorn, yes?”


He’d never admitted such a thing to *anyone*. But this casual, carefree man was strangely… freeing. Jon didn’t feel intimidated anymore, unlike with Stannis; or pressured to uphold his manners, like with Howland Reed or the Manderlys. He felt like he could just *be*. Jon Snow, not a future Lord. Jon Snow, not Daenerys Targaryen’s betrothed.

He’d never understood how liberating it could feel to be *just* a bastard.

“Yes, it is quite likely that she hates you,” Oberyn nodded, thoughtfully. “It is to be expected in fact.”

Jon gasped, shocked. “But—I thought you said…”

Oberyn rolled his eyes. “I understand the world, Jon Snow. No one treats a bastard well in these parts, and less so in the middle Kingdoms. And the Targaryen’s have always been prideful creatures—the females often fiercer than the males, although they try to hide it behind highborn courtesies.”

“So, even *you* think it’s hopeless,” Jon said, mournfully, staring at the letter. He’d *known* it was true. “I will be miserable.”

“Bah, stupid boy, that is not what I said at all.” Jon blinked at the man, who rolled his eyes. “The solution is simple: Seduce her.”

For a heartbeat, Jon was socked into silence. And then he surged to his feet, making Oberyn jump. “She’s only *eight!* That’s disgusting!” Jon shouted, appalled. The Dornishman gaped at him, and Jon glared down at him in revulsion. He *knew* there had to be something about this man—it was too good to be true until that point. Now Jon understood—he was a degenerate!

Jon had to leave—this man was *dangerous*.

But before he could, Oberyn Martell threw his head back and *roared* with laugh. Jon gaped at him in angry bewilderment.

“He is mad. I should tell father!”

The man just kept laughing, the joyful sound resounding in the quiet wood. It seemed like it would never *end*!

“Oh,” Oberyn gasped, wiping tears from his eyes, unable to stop chuckling. Jon stared, unsure what to do, but extremely uncomfortable. “Oh Gods, I have not laughed so hard in *years*!” The man
grinned, and for the first time, his eyes were truly amused.

“I forgot you Northern fools are all prudes. Sit down, stupid broody boy, I did not mean sex. Gods, not even my worse enemies have ever accused me of such a thing! And many people hate me!” He chuckled again, head back and grinning wide.

Jon felt himself blush in mortification.

*Jon Snow, you idiot! Of course he didn’t mean…gods.*

Chastened, Jon sat, eyes wide. “But you said—I don’t understand!”

Oberyn rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. “Sit, boy, and I will tell you a universal truth about women.”

Wary, Jon nevertheless did as told.

“You see, they all hate us, at first. And any who say otherwise is lying. A woman will only love you after she has trained you sufficiently, and can perceive a benefit. That is why men are the pursuers—we must show them that we are worth their time. Seduction is our tool, you see.” Oberyn suddenly poked Jon’s chest and temple, making the boy jump. “Mind and heart—those are what you must seduce. Sex, the body, is something that comes after, or is paid for with no risk. To get your wife to love you, you must seduce her heart and mind. You must confidently show yourself to her, care for her, listen to her, and let her love what she finds in you.”

Jon squinted at the man. That didn’t sound…right.

“But—I’ve done everything Lady Catelyn wants. She’s never warmed to me. What if Lady Daenerys…?”

Oberyn sighed as if Jon was a moron, making the boy frown at him in annoyance. “First of all, Lady Catelyn is not to be your wife, and she will never love you.” Jon’s chest clenched…but he knew it was true. “The Fish is a cold creature, always swimming in one direction, safe in the water. They only care about their own offspring—which is natural. Don’t look for love from the Fish. But a Dragon? Ah, a Dragon is all fire: rage and desire. The Dragon could love or destroy—but it will always be with passion. Therefore, a dragon can be seduced—no matter how fierce it is!”

Jon was speechless.

“And you are a wolf, broody boy, even if only a pup. If a wolf gave up the first time it failed a hunt, it would starve. And you are even worse—you are giving up before the hunt.” Oberyn shook his head in annoyance. “Don’t starve, Jon Snow—I rather like you. Learn to hunt.”

*Learn to…hunt?*

Could he do that? He looked down at the letter with new eyes. Yes, it would probably be filled with horrible things. It would probably hurt him…but it wasn’t the end! This letter was only the beginning. Why was he giving up before even doing anything?

*Aren’t I a wolf?*

“Yes…yes, I can do it,” Jon whispered, looking searchingly at Oberyn. The man grinned, and stood.

“Good,” he patted Jon on the head fondly, and left.
Taking a fortifying breath, Jon Snow broke the seal. Bravely, he forced himself to open it and read.

Hello Jon Snow,

My name is Daenerys Targaryen, and in eight years, we are to be married (You probably know that). First, I want to say that I know your parents were not wed, and that the King is forcing me to marry you because he wants to shame my House and humiliate me.

Jon paused, closing his eyes briefly. Now will come the contempt. He was tempted to just stop, but he wanted to be a wolf. With a deep breath, remembering Overyn’s words, Jon bravely continued.

And the next words shocked him.

He will not succeed. We won’t let him. A mean king in the south won’t make us miserable in our own home—and he won’t make our people or our children miserable, either. He won’t control us, like Essosi slaves. In fact, we will do whatever we want in our lands: we will be happy. We, our people, our children: we will be happy! And if the king has a problem, let him come and try to ruin it.

You see, Maester Cressen told me that Moat Cailin has stood unconquered for thousands of years—and cousin Stannis will ensure it will stand for thousands more. No one will ever harm our family—and if they try, we will meet them with Fire and Blood. (Those are my House Words. They sound very impressive, don’t you think? I do.)

So, this brings me to my second point. I think your last name, “Snow,” is very pretty—but I rather like my own name. Jon Targaryen sounds very nice, don’t you think? (And this way, people will never forget who we are). Also, maybe you don’t like your name too much. My friend Tyene taught me that ‘bastards’ are treated really badly, even though it’s their parents who should be blamed! People are really stupid sometimes. So, I imagine the people there may have been mean to you for your last name. I know that people are really mean to me here, because my Father was the Mad King. (I hope you don’t hold it against me, and I won’t hold it against you that your father helped take the throne.) Cousin Stannis says “men (and women) should be judged on their own merits.” This means what they do, and what not their family did, is important. (Cousin Stannis is very smart. You should listen to him.) So, it would be nice if we just judged each other on who we are.

He felt as if he were in a dream—the type he mourned when he awoke.

So, you see, legitimacy doesn’t matter. You don’t have to have a family name—you can take mine. I will take you into my family: you will be Jon Targaryen, and the mean king can rot if he thinks he can force us to be sad. (Does this mean I’ll have to cloak you? I’ll ask Maester Cressen.) Myra (Cousin Stannis’s wife) tells me that I am a dragon: and no one tells a dragon what to do. “A dragon is not a slave,” you see. So, if I am a dragon, then you will be a dragon, too. Together, we’ll decide our future.

Jon’s tears began to drip down onto the paper, smearing the ink. He blinked hastily, wiping them away.

So, what is it like in the north? Is it very cold? I hope our castle has big fireplaces, because I like the heat—it’s the only thing I’ll miss in King’s Landing. What are your brothers and sisters like? Myra and Cousin Stannis have two children—Steffon and Ryelle. Both have pretty purple eyes and black hair. Don’t tell anyone, but I hope the next baby has blond hair like Myra. It’s lonely being the only Targaryen left, so it would be nice if someone looks like me. Do your siblings look like you? Cousin Stannis told me that you look a lot like Lord Stark—that must be nice! I hope you write back soon, and we can exchange letters until we meet, like cousin Stannis and Lord Stark. They’re friends, even
if my cousin denies it. He’s very stubborn (Myra always rolls her eyes, but don’t tell him I said that). So, we shall be friends as well.

Um, lastly, please be a nice person.

Sincerely,

Princess Daenerys of House Targaryen

(Oh, and tell me if the seal on this letter was broken. I’ll have to talk with cousin Stannis.)

Jon relapsed a sobbing laugh, and then buried his head against his knees, biting down upon his lip to keep from weeping aloud. He was such a fool—all these years wasted on fearing this girl. Why hadn’t he just written to her? Why hadn’t he gathered the courage, and avoided all this pointless misery?

I know that people are really mean to me here… please be a nice person.

Why had he never thought about that? Why had he always just focused on his own emotions, rather than thinking about how cruel people would surely be towards the daughter of the Mad King? How had he never considered that perhaps she was just as scared of him as he’d been of her? He was only a strange man she’d never met who might treat her like these other ‘mean’ people did. Yet she’d still gathered the courage to write this letter, while he’d needed encouragement just to read it. Such a fool.

We will be happy.

Yes, he decided, hugging the letter close as he cried. Yes.

Legitimacy doesn’t matter… I will take you into my family.

A sob broke free, heard only by the weeping weirwood.

You will be a dragon, too.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, the letter :D
Robb Stark spent his week hating his mother, hating his brother, and hating his father.

Most of all…he’d hated himself.

Those first moments after he’d left Jon in the courtyard, his ears had rung and he could barely breath. He’d ended up in the privy, vomiting until his mouth burned, and nothing but bile remained. Yet he couldn’t chase the feeling of something horrible inside him. There was a terrible pressure in his heart, but he couldn’t get it out.

Theon had found Robb there, crouched over the mess he’d made, gasping.

“Robb…”

“No—no I did see it. I knew she could be cruel. I saw how miserable he got sometimes…but I didn’t want to deal with it. That’s why Jon never told me. This is all my fault.”

“Oh, shut up,” Theon scoffed. “The bastard has had it good here. What’s wrong with making sure he never forgets to be grateful? In the Iron Islands, he’s have been little more than a slave. Not getting a fucking castle,” he ended bitterly.

“My mother had to force him to lose to me, Theon,” Robb retorted, “All these years I gloated and teased him, when in reality…”
“He’s probably been laughing behind your back,” Theon said scornfully.

Robb shook his head, denying it. “Jon wouldn’t do that. You know he wouldn’t.”

Theon’s mouth twisted mulishly, but he didn’t respond.

“He’s never trusted me,” Robb said, mournful. “We grew up together, and he’s never trusted me. Why? Did he think I wouldn’t try to stop it? Why, Theon?”

“What is trust to a bastard?” Theon scoffed, dismissive. “Lady Catelyn’s right to hate him—who knows what goes on in his head. For all you know, he hates all of us. He’ll return one day and burn this place to the ground.”

For all I know…

That night, Robb learned from his father that his mother was being sent away. The news had made him feel like he’d once again been splayed out on his back, Jon’s sword at his throat. And a black pit had grown in his gut. His family…was being destroyed.

He’d felt like a powerless little boy, and he’d let dark thoughts engulf him. He didn’t know who he was, he didn’t know who his mother was, his life was being torn down around him. Robb was miserable!

It wasn’t fair! Why was this happening? Why couldn’t everything just stay the way it was?

And so, he’d looked for someone to blame…and chosen Jon.

Now it was a week later, his stomach sick, he stood outside Jon’s door, hand raised. He’d avoided his brother until now, his feeling so mixed, so confused, whenever he thought of him.

And then…


“Robb,” Ned exhaled, face softening. Robb had avoided Ned since he’d told him Catelyn was being sent away. “My son…I’m so sorry. I should never have let it get to this state. If I could change it…”

Robb looked down. He shook his head. “I just wanted to thank you…I know Mother did…I know she undermined you. But you still…Bran and Arya…Thank you, Father.”

Ned Stark was the best man Robb knew. He hoped he could live up to him one day. He hoped he could make him proud.

Ned sighed sadly. “I didn’t, Robb… Your brother asked it of me.”

Robb remained there, shocked, for many moments. “Jon…but—but she…”

Ned exhaled deeply, face aged. “He is his mother’s son.”

Robb breathed deeply, heart in his throat, prepared for Jon to turn him away.

As I have turned him away, every time he came to me. I let Theon…sway me.

He knocked, teeth clenched, regret permeating his body. Jon would be in his rights to shun him. Robb had proven that he couldn’t be trusted. No wonder Jon hadn’t told him anything.
The door opened, and Jon stared at him as if he were a ghost, eyes wide. His brother hunched his shoulders, and Robb was reminded of all the times Jon would have a similar posture when Catelyn was around. He’d always been expecting pain from her...

*And now he expects it from me.*

“Can I come in?” Robb asked hesitantly, scanning his brother’s face.

For a moment, Jon didn’t react. Then he carefully stepped to the side. Robb took a fortifying breath and walked into his brother’s room, hearing the soft click of the door behind him. There was an awkward, uncomfortable silence between them. Robb hated it, and to distract himself, he looked around.

He’d never noticed how barren Jon’s room was before. Only a bed, a nightstand, a dresser, and a small table. Compared to the lavish southern decor his mother insisted upon in her children’s rooms and the personal apparels each of the siblings had, Jon’s room seemed like it housed a guest.

*Does Jon…feel like a guest here?*

Robb felt worse than before. How could he claim to love his brother, when he’d paid Jon so little attention?

Despondent, the heir to Winterfell sat carefully before the table—and frowned at the multiple pieces of parchment littering the surface. Most only had a few lines written, and—he looked to the floor—many crumpled pieces lined the floor. Curious, Robb reached out to pick one up, but suddenly Jon was there, quickly snatching all the papers away.

Robb blinked at his brother’s red face, and noticed how his fingers were covered in ink.

“Are you practicing lessons?” Robb hesitantly guessed.

Jon swallowed, tucking the papers carefully in his nightstand. “I’m—I’m trying to write a letter.”

Robb raised his brows. Who was his brother writing to, and why was it so hard?

He opened his mouth to ask—and then shook his head in frustration. *Stop stalling, Robb!*

Taking a fortifying breath, Robb confronted his brother. “Father told me that you convinced him to let Mother take Bran and Arya with her.” Robb took an awkward breath. “After all she did to you…Why?”

Jon looked away awkwardly and sat down slowly on the edge of his bed. “I realized recently…that I’m not the only one hurting. Other people in the world are going through bad things as well…unfair things.” Jon took a breath, and continued resolutely. “I-I promised to myself that I would be honest with you from now on, and…and while I can’t *stand* Lady Catelyn, I think she was hurting, too. *Father betrayed* her, Robb…and I reminded her of it, every day. So, while I can never forgive her for all she did to me, while I’m *happy* she’s gone…I think I can understand why she did it. So—so taking her children away is—is too harsh.”

Jon tried to smile, but it was weak at best. “And, I know what it’s like to grow up without a mother…it wasn’t fair to Bran and Arya, either. They shouldn’t have to pay for another person’s mistake.” Jon looked up, beseeching. “*Father promised you and Sansa can visit her!* I-I don’t know why he didn’t let Sansa go with them, I asked him to.” Jon hunched even further, once more looking to the floor. “And you’re the heir, so you can’t…”
Jon slumping, cursing weakly. “Other take me, why am I so bad with words?”

Robb stared blankly at him, his skinny, pale brother, with his dark hair and grey eyes—the features of Winterfell, which Robb had always envied—and thought that Jon Snow was probably the best person Robb had ever met.

Robb didn’t think he could forgive someone who had treated Jon like Catelyn had—let alone ensure the woman wasn’t separated from her children. How could he, even for a moment, have doubted his brother?

I will be loyal to you, Jon. Robb thought fiercely. You will always be my brother. I will be loyal, no matter what the future holds. This I swear, before the Old Gods and the New.

“Want to go to the training yard?” Robb asked, smiling hopefully. “You can show me some of that skill you’ve been hiding. It’s unfair to keep all that talent to yourself.”

Jon finally met Robb’s gaze, pupils huge. “Really? You—you forgive me?”

“That easily, brother?” Robb tsked. “You have years of lies to make up for. As punishment, you’ll have to endure facing me in every contest I can think of. You won’t beat me so easily again!”

Robb sprang to his feet, holding his hand out to Jon. The dark-haired boy stared at it for a moment, unsure. Then, hesitantly, he grasped it. Robb yanked him abruptly to his feet, laughing when Jon stumbled and nearly fell. Jon glared good-naturedly and tried to push him, but Robb danced away, grinning. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten about this mystery letter! What is Jon hiding, I wonder?”

Jon blushed deeply, but as he followed Robb out the door, he was smiling.

“You know Jon, you really are terrible with words. You’re lucky you’re going to be a Lord in the future, and not a poet.”

“Shut up, Robb!”

*****

Jon Snow and Robb Stark were sparing in the courtyard, taunting each other. Stannis was watching the boys from the window of the Guest House, where he’d been staying. He’d been drawn to the window by the commotion of wooden swords meeting, surprised by the sound after the silence that had permeated Winterfell since it’s Lady and two youngest children left.

Stannis remembered the somber moment when the hollow woman had boarded a carriage, ready to leave, when Ned had come out into the courtyard accompanying a wet nurse and a small girl with black hair. Catelyn had watched, disbelieving, as he’d handed her the babe, and helped the small girl into the carriage. The lady of Winterfell had broken down, weeping and thanking him as she held her children close.

The moment was broken when Sansa had run screaming from the house, a disheveled septa hurrying behind her. “Mommy! No, no please, I want to go too! Mommy! Don’t leave me!” the child screamed.

But Ned had been resolute. Stannis felt grim, watching as he held the struggling girl while the carriage left. Then Sansa escaped his arms, turned to Jon Snow, and screamed “This is your fault! Septa Mordane told me so! She says you’re evil and horrible and I hate you!”

Crying, the small girl ran back inside, while the pallid Septa Mordane stood there, under Eddard’s
Like many servants before her, she’d been dismissed. The woman had been sent back with Catelyn, protesting all the while that Sansa needed ‘the guidance of the Seven’. Personally, Stannis thought it a good move on Eddard’s part—the Faith was corrupt, and religion was nothing more than superstitious babble. He’d spoken to the man about acquiring a northern lady to educate his daughter.

“I think that would be best for her, Stannis—I saw, nearly too late, what she was becoming under Catelyn and the Septa; too southern for the North. That’s why I couldn’t let her leave. Hopefully, the Houses of the North still trust me with their daughters. I know what this will look like to them, Stannis. I know they’ll assume some other reason for sending my wife away—no one will believe this is for Jon.”

“You are the Lord—their opinions are irrelevant.”

Eddard had signed, “You know that’s not true—but thank you, Stannis.”

He’d been uncomfortable at the sentiment—but even more uncomfortable at the fact that he really didn’t believe his own words, and had just said them to comfort Ned. Stannis Baratheon, friends with a Northern fool. How strange the world is.

Oberyn Martell came to stand before him, making Stannis stiffen.

“Brothers,” the prince smiled. “a wonderful bond, do you not agree, Baratheon? I hear you and your brothers are…close.”


The prince grinned, brutal as a sword’s edge. “Games? I am simply trying to make conversation. Is it not the polite thing to do?”

Stannis met his gaze soberly. Oberyn Martell’s mouth often smiled—his eyes, rarely so. “Why are you still here?”

Obery sighed “Again, Baratheon? Did we not already have such a conversation?”

“Jon Snow has been making careful inquiries about the Lady Ashara Dayne and of Starfall. He got that information from you.”

“Is it a crime to inform a young boy about his mother?” Obery asked, innocent.

Stannis released a careful exhale, controlling himself. Myra would be better able to deal with this man—she had more patience with the games of the highborn.

“It is very convenient that his ‘mother’ happens to be Dornish, and that the only people who can tell him the truth—besides his reluctant father—are in Starfall.”

The Prince lounged against the window, watching the boys below. “Eddard Stark has good taste in women. Well…had.”

“Manipulating him is cruel, Viper. I thought Dorne was above hurting children.”

Oberyn shot him a cutting look, mouth twisted in a savage grin, teeth on display.

“I have simply told him a story, one his father should have told him years ago. Whether it is true or not, I cannot say—nor have I claimed otherwise. What the boy decides to do with the information is
his own business.”

Stannis watched him, expression brisk. “And you wouldn’t be disappointed if he chose a different path?”

The Viper straightened. “You are still here for the same reason I am, Baratheon: that boy has piqued our interest. Your ward’s future is tied with his, and that has you invested. I? I am more interested in Jon Snow than in the young Targaryen. I think I could help him—in ways you cannot. A shy boy would not suit you, Lord of Dragonstone—you are the type that needs others to face you head on, or you begin to make assumptions.”

Stannis narrowed his eyes at the man. Was that a guess, or…?

“Ned Stark will make his choice soon, and that boy will give him his opinion. Honorable Ned Stark is much too swamped with guilt to make this choice alone. If Jon Snow chooses Dorne, I will not deny him.” With those last words, the Viper retreated. Stannis watched him walk down the steps of the guest house.

He turned his attention to the courtyard, watch the Viper appear. The two boys bowed quickly, Robb Stark appeared awed to be in such a famous presence, while Jon…looked comfortable. The skinny boy was relaxed with the cunning man in a way he’d never relaxed around Stannis.

A shy boy would not suit you. No, perhaps he wouldn’t. Daenerys—who was sure of his love for her, and touched by a Dragon’s arrogance—needed no prodding to tell Stannis exactly what she wanted. Myra and his Valyrian-blooded people were the same. Jon Snow, however, would keep it all inside himself, and Stannis would likely never notice if the boy was unhappy.

Stannis watched as the Viper picked up a wooden sword, and prodded and poked at Jon Snow until the annoyed boy stopped trying to refuse and took up a stance against the Dornishman. Stannis watched as they began to spar, drawing a crowd of onlookers. He noticed Ned Stark pause on his way past a door, and he too stopped to watch the spectacle.

Martell laughed at and taunted Jon, dancing away when the boy struck. Stannis watched on and on as they battled. Jon would lose every time, often ending up in the mud as Oberyn violently parried his strikes, driving the boy back and often making him stumble.

But Jon kept getting up. He was winded, but his eyes were determined in a way Stannis had never seen from him before.

He was serious.

And he was learning. The more man and boy fought, the more Jon began to anticipate the Viper’s moves, until finally, finally, he managed to get a hit on the man’s arm. The onlookers gasped.

Oberyn smiled his quicksilver grin, but Stannis saw genuine pleasure there for the first time. “Excellent, boy!” He then thrust, knocked Jon’s sword from his hand, and crouched down to sweep the boy’s legs out from under him. The whole maneuver was as quick and unexpected as his namesake. Jon fell down into the mud, his grunt loud in the quiet.

This time, Jon just lay there, covered in sweat, panting as if he’d never get his breath back. Oberyn stood easily, breath a little faster, but looking perfectly at ease. He’s a master, Stannis mused. The Lord of Dragonstone acknowledged that the Viper was probably much better than Stannis would ever be.

Oberyn Martell leaned down and offered Jon a hand, and the boy grasped it without hesitation. Jon
stood, looked up at the Viper, and *grinned* with open-mouthed joy.

Stannis met Ned Stark’s grim gaze.

*****

Ned Stark had gotten six offers from Lords willing to foster Jon—many more than he’d expected. Howland Reed’s offer had been amongst them, but Ned knew Greywater Watch was much too dangerous a place to send Jon. Howland knew the truth, and the mysterious man may one day tell Jon about Lyanna and Rhaegar, if he thought it necessary.

Ned couldn’t allow it.

The next offer came from the Manderlys, which Ned had seriously considered. It was close to Moat Cailin, would allow Jon to learn much about the North, and he would have the opportunity to become a Knight. But when he’d brought it up with the boy, he’d seen the pained smile. Ned was done ignoring the signs, and he would be damned if he forced his nephew to suffer in another household.

The third offer was from Roose Bolton, and Ned hadn’t even paused before setting that one aside. While the Dreadfort was a Northern House and could educate Jon, Ned didn’t like its Lord: something about Roose Bolton made him uneasy, and he was sure this offer was much more than it seemed. Catelyn’s words of Jon rising up to take Winterfell had echoed in his ears.

Highgarden had surprised him—Lord Tyrell’s letter had said he wished to make amends with the North after their conflict during the Rebellion. They would make his son into a chivalrous Knight, one who would treat the Lady Daenerys like a goddess. Stannis, who was present in the deliberations, had narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Still, Highgarden was a good place with good people, and it would allow Jon to learn more of the south and make a powerful ally.

Fifth, was a letter from Jon Arryn, asking that Jon be sent to him in King’s Landing, so that he may care for the boy as he had for the father. Ned was suspicious, and believed Robert may have had a hand in the offer, probably due to guilt and an effort to repair the bond between the men. Still, ned couldn’t deny that it was a good opportunity…but there were problems there, which were shared by the last offer.

Stannis himself said he’d like to take Jon in, but while Ned thought the man a just and fair Lord, and believed it would do the boy good to get to know his betrothed, Stannis’s wife was dangerous. Would a woman who had grown up with Rhaegar, who had spent most of her life with Queen Rhaella, be able to see something Targaryen in Jon? Or perhaps she had memories of the events that Jon’s presence could awaken. Many people said the boy had Ned’s features, but there were certain tells in both his face and personality that were not Stark in origin. Furthermore, Stannis admitted that the woman hated the idea of Daenerys wed to a bastard, and Ned was worried she’d make the boy’s life difficult.

In the end, however, all these deliberations were made mute.

“Father, I wish to be Prince Oberyn Martell’s squire. He agreed, as long as I could get your permission.” Jon stood before Ned, Stannis, and Benjen, nervous but resolute as he looked Ned in the eye. “Please father, I have never asked anything of you before, and you promised that it could be my choice.”

Ned exhaled carefully, aware that everyone was staring at him.
He’d know…ever since he’d seen Jon spar with the Viper, and then smile in a way Ned hadn’t
know he could smile. His grim nephew had finally looked like a boy of nine.

“Ashara Dayne may not be your mother,” Stannis said, making Ned jerk in shock. He whipped his
head towards the man, but Stannis was staring at Jon.

The boy flinched, but then stood tall. “I know. That’s—that’s not why. I want to travel, I want to be
a Knight, and…and I think an alliance with Dorne would benefit the North. Please, father.”

All good reasons, but Ned didn’t miss the pleading look in his son’s eyes. He wanted to know about
his mother—and as far as he knew, only Ned and those in Dorne had the truth. Ned was trapped—
he couldn’t deny that Ashara was Jon’s mother without making the Lord of Dragonstone even more
suspicious—possibly allowing him to connect the dots. Furthermore, Jon already knew that Ned had
brought him to King’s Landing from the south, and may just decide to go anyway to see if he could
find out information on his own.

But this way…this was Jon safely away from all the people who did know the truth, and in a
Kingdom famed for their good treatment of Bastards.

“If I said no,” Ned began carefully, watching the light face from Jon’s eyes. “Where would you
choose?”

“I’d choose House Reed—they’re willing, and I think I would be happy there. But—” Jon met his
gaze pleadingly “—please, father, let me go to Dorne.”

Howland or Oberyn.

Truth or lie.

Heedless of his brother’s disapproval, Ned Stark made his choice.

“All right, Jon.”

*****

Daenerys rushed out of the lessons, a huge grin on her face, and burst into Myra and Stannis’s room,
where the Lord of Dragonstone looked up from his spot by the dresser, where he’d been putting
away his cloak. Myra stood beamng at his side, with baby Ryelle in her arms. Steffon was likely still
with the master-at-arms.

“Cousin!” Daenerys laughed, rushing to him and jumping.

Stannis grunted in surprise as he caught her, shocked as the small girl clung to him tightly.

“Hello, Daenerys,” he said quietly, stroking her hair hesitantly.

The princess felt tears gather in her eyes. The knot in her stomach that had been there since Jamie
Lannister’s revelation loosened, and then disappeared. She was safe again—the world made sense.
Cousin Stannis was back, and the shadow of her father couldn’t haunt her anymore.

“I missed you,” Daenerys admitted, voice shaking.

“My love, what’s wrong?” Myra asked, astonished. She’d known something had been bothering the
girl, but Daenerys insisted she was imagining things. For once, she felt like she had something she
couldn’t share with Myra—not yet. Stannis had to know first: he’d know what to do!
“Did something happen?” Stannis asked carefully, walking to the bed and carefully setting her down. He fell to one knee before her, looking her up and down carefully. Myra hovered behind, frowning. The girl hesitated, but she didn’t want to ruin this moment. “Later! Tell me, cousin, what was it like? The North, the castle, Winterfell? And…my betrothed?” She asked hopefully, “Did you…like him?”

Stannis paused, and Daenerys felt the onset of disappointment, before her cousin said “Yes, I find that I did. I think he’ll please you, ward.”

Myra scoffed, but they ignored her, and Daenerys beamed! “Did you give him my letter? Did he respond? Where is it! Come on, cousin!”

Stannis signed in amusement and reached into his coat to take out a parchment. Daenerys grinned at latched onto it. Excellent! Now she could see if Jon Snow agreed to take her name! She’d asked Maester Cressen, sneakily, and he’d explained that the cloaking was for protection, not transferring of a name. That was perfect.

She couldn’t tell Stannis about her plans, of course—he’d probably say she couldn’t do it. Daenerys scoffed internally. Of course, I can. Watch me, mean king. Yes, the silver princess had many plans for her future home, and she’s see them done! A lot of the rules of society were stupid anyway—she didn’t see why she couldn’t simply change things that she didn’t like. It would make everyone happier.

“We have to send missives to the Great Houses,” Stannis said, turning to Myra. “We’ll host a meeting at Dragonstone, and they can send their representatives.”

“The ore?” Myra guessed, passing the baby into Stannis’s arms. The Lord smiled softly down at his daughter, and Daenerys grinned. Their family was growing!

“Tobho Mott is truly a master—I stopped by Dragonstone, as I said I would. He had a shield of the metal—which he is calling Aluminum, which means ‘perseverance’ in Old Ghiscari—and invited me to dent it. All of my strength was needed just to make a small mark—and that was using a Warhammer. Half as heavy as Iron, Myra.”

Myra gasped, hand covering her mouth.

Daenerys frowned. “Why is that impressive?”

Myra leaned down to kiss the confused girl on the forehead. “My love…this changes the game entirely.”

Daenerys tilted her head. What game?

*****

Later, in her room, Daenerys held the letter in her lap. After having dinner with everyone, happy that their family was complete again, Daenerys had finally told Stannis and Myra about the wildfire. Both had turned unbelievably pale, and Daenerys finally understood just how horrible the news was. Cousin Stannis had left at once, while Myra had sat, shaken, and gathered the three children close to her.

Things would be changing in King’s Landing—but she wasn’t sure how.

Well, Daenerys thought, cousin Stannis will take care of everything. The princess had other concerns at the moment. She looked down at the letter, worry in her stomach. Jon Snow. He was a person,
with thought and feelings—would they like each other? Would they be like Stannis and Myra? With a deep breath, she raised her chin in challenge, and opened it.

Princess Daenerys of House Targaryen,

Thank you for your letter. I hope you are well. The North is cold, but I will tell the architects to ensure your room has large fireplaces. You will be happy here, I swear it.

I have four half-siblings. Robb is the eldest, followed by Sansa, then Arya, and Bran, who was recently born. Only Arya shares my looks—black hair and grey eyes. We look like our father, Lord Stark. The others share their mother’s red hair and blue eyes. I have never met someone with violet eyes, but I’m sure they’re beautiful.

Daenerys grinned.

I’m not sure if I’m allowed to take your name. Although I very much want to. I really, really want to. I’ve always admired House Targaryen. I’ve read many stories. Your words are very impressive. Just, thank you. I don’t know how to say it properly...Robb has told me it is lucky I don’t have to be a poet. I hope this letter makes you happy. Your letter made me happy. I’m sorry, I think I’m ruining things. I’ve written the letter so many times, and it always sounds stupid, so this time I’m just sending it as is. Sorry.

She tilted her head, finding her smile widening. Was Jon Snow...shy? She suddenly had the impulse to tease him—and immediately felt bad. Still, she couldn’t stop the smile stretching her lips.

I would very much like it if we judged each other one who we are. And I’m sorry there are people there who don’t do that. And, yes, there are people here like that as well. But it’s gotten better recently. Also, soon I am going to be sent to Dorne, to foster with Prince Oberyn Martell. He is a great warrior, and he tells me that Dorne is unique in their treatment of...people like me. I will be his squire, and maybe a knight one day. Sansa likes Knights, perhaps you do, too?

Daenerys frowned, scrunching up her nose in anger. Who was mean to him? She’d make him tell her, she decided. Stupid people!

And fostering in Dorne? How lucky! She’d have to ask Maester Cressen for more lessons about it. And about Oberyn Martell. Maybe Cousin Stannis would take her with him on of his trips and they could stop in Dorne.

Lastly, I want you to know I will treat you well. I won’t ever harm you or disrespect you. I think I am a nice person. We will be happy together—I’ll try my best to make sure of it. Thank you again, and I hope you remain well.

Sincerely,

Jon Snow.

(And no, the seal wasn’t broken.)

The princess lay back on the bed, reading the letter again. Cousin Stannis was right—she thought they would get on very well. I wonder when we’ll meet.

“And you will take my name, Jon,” she whispered. “You will. And then we won’t be alone anymore.”

She fell asleep smiling.
Be kind to Jon, lol. It took him 2 hours to write that letter, stopping after every line with no idea where to go from there. Poor kid was so nervous.
So, my school replaced Exams with essays....yay.

Also, amazing Moat Cailin art by Bowandtie!! <3
Thank you!!
http://nomadshipper.tumblr.com/post/166533312820/

Olenna Tyrell was not used to being *outsmarted*. Sitting amongst her family, with crippled Willas in his chair opposite her, reading before the empty fireplace; young Loras and Margaery playing with dolls at their feet; and his son and his wife discussing some trivial matters at the settee at the other end of the room, Olenna had been feeling peaceful.

She’d begun growing used to these trite family moments and had become less and less interested in the common, every day intrigues of Highgarden. Unlike in her youth, when scheming and manipulation were her constant companions and never far from her thoughts, *family* and her grandchildren had calmed her vicious tongue and restless energy. Now, with her position and power firmly established, no longer did she breathlessly anticipate the latest piece of news in the realm.

*I’ve become complacent,* she thought viciously, slowly crumpling the letter in her hand. Moments before, a servant had given her Ned Stark’s response, and she’d disinterestedly anticipated the acceptance of that dour, stupid man. One letter, she’d thought: simple enough get his bastard when *Highgarden* was offering. Who else could compete with a Great House? Who else would give his bastard ties with the south? Who else could get the boy a Knighthood, while also allowing Highgarden to make *amends* for their ‘regretful actions’ during the war?

*Honorable Ned Stark should have jumped at the chance!*

“Grandmother?” Olenna scowled at Willas, who was watching her warily. Olenna aware that she’d clenched her fist so tightly around the offending letter, that not only had her nails pierce it, but they’d also pierced her palm. She immediately relaxed, turning her hand over to drop the offending letter to the floor. Loras snatched it away, and he and Margaery retreated with their prize, fighting over who got to read it first.

“Mother?” her fool son asked, coming to stand behind her chair. “What is it?”

“Martells,” Olenna spat, teeth clenched. “Those *snakes* have made their move.” While Olenna had been complacent, positive of their general hatred of the other six Kingdoms—*like a fool*—the Martells had *stolen* from her. And once again, it was the one who she hated most—the one who had *crippled* her grandson! Yes, she’d grown too complacent, and now she had to face her own stupidity.

“Jon Snow?” Margaery questioned, pinning down her squirming brother, victoriously reading the letter. “Isn’t that a bastard? What does Oberyn Martell want a bastard for?”

“Grammar, sweetling,” Alerie chastened gently. “You are a Lady.”
“What!” Mace gasped, ignoring his wife, and snatched the letter from his daughter. He read it, then looked up at Olenna, gaping like an idiot. “But—but how could—we didn’t even know he was in the North!”

“Fool!” Olenna spat. “Spies are useless with that one—that’s why Doran always has him be his courier. The Viper never ends up in the place he says he’ll go. But he’s barely moved in years, and we let ourselves grow too comfortable.”

“What will we do now, Mother?” Alerie asked, voice sweet. Olenna scowled at her, but for once didn’t snap at the woman for the title.

“I don’t understand!” Margaery interrupted, frowning. “Why do we want to foster a bastard?” She wrinkled her nose, doe eyes wide.

“He’s the one betrothed to the Targaryen girl, sister,” Willas said gently. She blinked, then popped her mouth open in understanding. Loras nodded as if he’d known all along.

“He’s lost to us now,” Olenna muttered, leaning back in her chair, and tying her hands together in her lap. “The Viper made sure of it. Who knows where that boy will end up.” No, no she needed another plan. Some other way…she’d been too complacent, but no more. The others remained silent as she thought, and slowly Olenna looked toward Loras. The beautiful ten-year-old boy raised his brows in bemusement. Yes, he would be heart-breaking one day. He had her face, after all.

“You’ll be leaving for Storm’s End in a few days,” she noted. Loras blushed, looked down, and nodded.

The young Lord of Strom’s End had come to visit after making his trip south to Sunspear. The two boys had hit it off. The manner of said relationship didn’t particularly concern Olenna—her grandson would always be her grandson. However, this presented an interesting opportunity, which she’d fully encouraged.

“Robert Baratheon’s youngest brother, the one he likes, will have many opportunities to visit King’s Landing. Perhaps he’ll even attain a position there one day.” Olenna leaned back and smiled slowly. “And you, Loras, will encourage the visits as often as possible.”

“Mother?” Mace asked, lost. Willas, however, was contemplative. Thank the Crone that at least one grandson had escaped his father’s stupidity.

Loras nodded, but he didn’t understand why either. “You will meet often with the Targaryen girl, my handsome grandson. And you will make nice with her.”

If the boy was lost to her, then she’d simply focus on the girl.

*****

Stannis had been having a difficult week. The day he’d returned from the North, weary but content with Jon Snow—although not so much with his choice—and filled with plans for the new ore, Daenerys’s story about wildfire had stolen his breath and filled his chest with ice. His first impulse had been to pack his family onto a ship and said back to Dragonstone, the rest of the city be damned.

Wildfire…seven hells.

Curbing the impulse, he’s instead acted intelligently. He’d immediately demanded to see Jaime Lannister, the golden kingslayer, who Stannis had never given much thought besides a general dislike for his deeds and his family. But this news…wildfire. If the man had been telling Daenerys
the truth, rather than some cruel lie to make her miserable…well, either way, Stannis needed to speak with the Lion.

Jaime Lannister had initially met Stannis with defiance, making the Lord of Dragonstone doubt the story, but Stannis hadn’t let the arrogant man’s attitude impede him. He’d demanded the truth, and nothing but, with proof.

The lion had fallen quickly after that, telling Stannis the whole, horrifying tale.

“After the sack, I hunted down the remaining pyromancers who’d made the stuff locations and killed them,” Lannister said, weary.

“We have you never told anyone! Bloody hells, Lannister, we’re standing on top of a death trap!”

Jaime glared. “I’m not a fool, Baratheon! I told my father, and we hunted it all down. It was everywhere—in the swears, under the castle. The remaining pyromancers, those who knew nothing about its creation, deactivated the stuff—or whatever those bloody alchemists do. We never told anyone…because we’re not sure if we got it all. We don’t want to cause a panic.”

Stannis placed his head in his hands. He’d commissioned a detailed map of King’s Landing and its sewer systems—which didn’t work very well, if the smell was anything to go by—and couldn’t find rest until he had the map before him.

Stannis couldn’t trust the words of another man, especially one as ruthless as Tywin Lannister. He’d send his own men to comb every inch of the city, until he was sure there was truly nothing remaining of the old King’s Madness.

Wildfire…seven hells, Jaime Lannister deserves a commemoration.

He’d never trusted the man, despite his apparent attempts to treat Daenerys well. He still didn’t—killing the King had saved the man’s own life, as well as the lives of the Lannister Army. It wasn’t a selfless move. However, it was the right one, and the Lion had been condemned for it for years.

Stannis knew that happened to men who were scorned by everyone—men no one cared about enough to just question before deciding their opinions. Stannis grimaced. Perhaps he’d try to…talk with the Lannister boy more.

Daenerys, it seemed—despite the pain she felt over the man’s deeds, and the cause of those deeds—was determined to make peace with the Lion.

“He saved everyone, cousin. He’s a real knight.”

Bloody hells, but all Stannis needed was some type of friendship between the young girl and the vain man. Daenerys was much too trusting for her own good, despite what she’d experienced in King’s Landing. Once she made her mind up about something, no one could dissuade her.

And already, the girl was much too willing to adapt herself to different ideas and cultures. She had granite in her soul when it was something she believed in, but too much curiosity to be tied down to one set of ideas.

Stannis took back the assertion he’d made at White Harbor: that girl would and could adapt to any setting, and quickly make it her own. Already, she’d begun to play the games of King’s Landing, learning how to handle the nobles and the servants. Fewer and fewer people were outright cruel to the girl anymore, although Stannis had no idea how she’d accomplished such a thing.
“She leans, Stannis. And she listens. It’s her greatest gift. All she needs is an able teacher, who won’t try to stifle her.” His wife, as always, was correct.

*Daenerys would never have been Mad enough to rely on Wildfire—the girl would have found some other way to—*

Stannis cut the thought off immediately, chest cold. The thought bordered on treason—and he’d begun to have too many similar ones recently.

Shaking his head, once, Stannis took a breath and stood. He had work to do—he’d neglected his position as Master of Ships for too long. And he needed to pen the letters to the great houses—his new metal would make a huge impact in the Kingdoms, and it was time to begin planning for how to best make use of it.

*And then we’ll see about the Crown’s debt.*

*****

Jaime Lannister was many things, but he’s never before considered himself a fool. Wonderful, yes. Talented, powerful, of course. But never a fool. One talk with the Targaryen wench, one question from said girl, and Jaime Lannister had spilled his greatest secret. Tyrion would probably laugh himself sick.

After bowing to her until she’d disappeared—like the bloody fool I think I’m not—the golden man had retreated to his chamber with a stolen pitch of wine and one pathetic cup, and promptly gotten drunk. He’d regretted it in the morning, but not enough to stop himself from reaching for the near-empty pitcher and promptly buried his face in it.

Barristan the Bold had not been amused when Jamie missed his rounds, nor when he’d found the lion laughing, puking drunk in his rooms, but the man could go fuck a cactus for all Jaime bloody cared.

*Years. Years!* He’d waited and waited, hoping someone would one day ask him for his story, hoping someday the news would be made known to all, and instead of scorn he could finally receive the admiration he deserved! *Years.*

“And the one who does it was his daughter,” he muttered, laughing bitterly.

“What?” Cersei frowned, looking at him from the balcony, wine glass in hand and dressed only in a light sleep robe. “You’ve not been yourself, recently, Jaime. What ails you?”

Jamie sat up, reclining against the headboard. These were foolish thought to entertain now. Cersei’s pig husband had gotten it into his head recently to visit his wife, and Jaime, stomach sick with hatred, had been forced to stay away. Finally, the man had left, and Jaime had kissed the bruises on his sister’s body, sick with regret and disgust. He’d killed one king already…why not another?

“Nothing. Barristan caught me drunk and I missed some pointless patrols. Like the King ever leaves his room enough to bother with multiple guards.”

Cersei grimaced, and Jaime immediately frowned in regret.

“It’s not like you to drink,” she said instead, taking a sip of her wine. Lately, his sister was rarely without a glass, but she rebuked him after any attempt to confront her. And Jaime had just gotten her back, he didn’t want to fight.

“Even I sometimes feel the need to drive myself unconscious. It’s the difficulty of handling my own
beauty, you understand. The guilt of being so perfect, when every other man is so ugly… it’s just not easy to deal with.” He smirked, and she signed in annoyance.

“Sometimes you speak like Tyrion,” she snapped, turning away. His smile faded. Ask me about it...I’ll tell you.

“He is our brother.” He knew he shouldn’t have said the words as soon as they came out.

She glared at him, disgusted. “He is nothing but a vile monster, and you know it. I do wish you’d stop insisting that he is in any way related to us.”

He couldn’t have killed our mother if he wasn’t, Jaime thought. He kept silent.

“Come back to bed,” he said instead, gently—pleading. “I’ve missed you these days.”

She didn’t turn back to him, back stiff, and Jaime sighed. Cersei’s moods were every shifting lately—and sometimes he didn’t know what to do. He wished they could just go back to simpler times in Casterly Rock. Times when they had no burdens and no regrets, just two children who loved each other.

“I’m going to watch Joffery’s sword practice,” she said instead. “My maid will be here any moment. It’s better that you leave now.”

Jaime got to his feet and dressed. The dismissal burned, but he knew that no one could ever know about this. No one would ever understand.

Perhaps the little Targaryen would…but no, she’s been raised by that cold bastard.

Jaime kissed her goodbye but got the feeling—as he sometimes did—that she only indulged him. He didn’t know what to do at those moments—he felt lonelier than he usually did. Jamie shook his head free of the absurd thoughts. Cersei was simply worried about being caught: wanting him to hurry along was natural.

So why did he feel an emptiness inside him at times?

He took a breath as he walked away. He’d simply have to try harder to please her. She was the only one he had.

“We are two halves of a whole,” a younger Cersei murmured, clutching his hand tightly as she stared up into his eyes. “You are me. Do you understand? Twins.”

“And you are me?” he’d smiled, happy with the idea. Two halves—always together.

Cersei blinked, frowning. “Well…I suppose so.”

*****

Jon breathed deeply while he opened the letter, worried that she’d have been displeased with his pathetic return attempt. That whole week before Stannis Baratheon had left, Jon had wasted countless pieces of parchments. Maester Luwin had been in a rage, demanding to know who’d stolen all his paper. Jon (and Robb, who knew the truth) played innocent. Now another letter was in his hands, and this time he was filled with a mixture of trepidation and excitement. Once more under the weirwood—a place he’d only be for a few days more before he left with Oberyn—Jon prepared himself and read
Jon,

Who are these stupid mean people? Tell me—cousin Stannis will take care of them! Or we will when we are older. When you take my name, we will be able to do many things that we can’t now. You will be a Lord and I a Lady—no longer children who have to do whatever people tell us. (Or perhaps a prince and princess?)

He exhaled, smiling. He liked how…sure of everything she was.

Maester Cressen has told me all about Dorne—did you know that men and women can inherit in Dorne? That sound like a good idea—some people shouldn’t be allowed to rule. My father, for example. I think the realm would have been a better place if my mother had taken the throne. Myra tell me she was a just and fair Queen—that she’d have made the realm a better place. Well, she could not have been worse than my father. You see, I learned something new about him recently. Do you know Jamie Lannister? He’s the ‘kingslayer’.

Jon frowned. He vaguely remembered his Father once declaring that Jamie Lannister was an oathbreaker, who should have been sent to the alongside the other Targaryen loyalists. He must be a terrible person, Jon concluded. One should always keep their oaths—his father taught him that. But then Jon read her account of what really happened during the Sack, and was astonished. Wildfire!

My father was truly a monster, you see. Yet while I am glad he was stopped, I mourn him. Am I a bad person, do you think? Sometimes I dream about him—there are stories that say he used to be a good man, although not an exceptional king—and I dream that he returned to who he’d been for me. Am I a horrible person to wish for such a thing—when he’d been the man who’d planned to murder thousands?

Jon placed his hand upon his chest, feeling pain there. Her dreams reminded him of his own, the secret wishes he’d had about his mother—a woman who would love him, who would ignore his bastard status. An impossible dream, he’d thought—until he'd learned more about Dorne.

I considered not telling you any of this at first—of ripping up this letter and throwing it away, of writing about common things instead. But then I would be dishonest, and I want us to know each other, Jon. To be honest. Perhaps we will not like what we find, but I do not want to hide from the truth. If we know now, we can plan for it.

At this point, Jon didn’t think it possible to dislike this girl. But she could very well dislike him when she got to know him. His heart began to beat anxiously.

“Learn to hunt,” Oberyn’s words whispered. Jon took a fortifying breath. He would be a knight—a famed warrior, and he would treat her well. He’d promised to make her happy, and he would.

I know you say you are not a poet, but I do not expect one. I simply want honesty, no matter what the content. I want you to tell me of all your adventures and thoughts. With Prince Overyn, I’m sure they’ll be fascinating! Also, I did not mind your last letter. It was rather...interesting. And yes, I do like knights. When you become one, I shall give you my favour.

Jon felt himself blush, but he didn’t understand why. He felt as if...as if she were smiling at him, but it was not a smile he was used to. He shook his head in bemusement.

Write back soon, Jon. And next time, tell me of the Prince. Is he truly as wild and unpredictable as they say? Has he truly been everywhere? What stories he must have!

Sincerely,
“I will interesting, too,” Jon frowned—and shook his head. Why had he said that? He took the letter with him to his room to write a response, faintly bewildered, and rather annoyed at Oberyn Martell.

A fortnight later, Jon stood at the main gate, his things packed in a satchel, and his stomach was mixed with anxiety, fear, excitement, and bewilderment. He was really leaving—probably for years. Gods, *years*. Jon suddenly didn’t want to leave. He wanted to retreat back to his room, tell his father everything was a mistake, and just stay here forever.

*But I can’t…I have to learn to be a wolf.*

Jon turned to Sansa first, who was in the arms of Lady Jonelle Cerwyn, a plump, homely woman with a kind smile. “Come on, little lady. As we practiced,” the woman nudged her reluctant charge.

Sansa looked up at her, unsure, and then back at Jon. She remained silent, and just as hurt was gathering in his chest, Sansa carefully said. “Thank you for convincing father to let me visit mother. Have…have a good trip.” She hid her face back in Jonelle neck, and Jon took a deep breath, near tears.

“Remain well, Sansa.”

Theon just gave him a scowl, and Jon ignored him. There is one person he’d *never* miss. He turned directly to Robb instead.

“You’ll *always* be my brother,” Rob swore, hugging him tightly. “Send letters, you hear me? I want to know all about Dorne.”

“I will,” Jon promised, feeling his eyes tear up. He blinked them away swiftly.

The boys pulled away, and Robb smiled. “The next time I see you, you’ll be a lord. Farewell, Jon.”

Jon smiled faintly. “And you, Robb.”

His father was the last person he looked too. The man’s face was grim as usual, but there was a softness, a gentle regret in his eyes. Jon hoped that one day, when he found out the truth, he could talk openly and honestly with his father. They could finally talk about Jon’s mother. But right now, he knew the man wasn’t ready.

*Did you kill her brother, father? Is that why…why you are so guilty? Did you love her, but had to leave her?*

“Father, thank you. For everything you’ve done for me. Thank you.”

Ned drew him close and hugged the small boy carefully. “You are my blood, Jon. Never forget it. Never forget your roots.”

“Never,” Jon swore.

And then they left, he and Oberyn alone on two horses, Winterfell getting small and smaller behind them. For a long time, Jon couldn’t say a word, too overcome. For once, the Viper seemed content to remain silent. Eventually, they reached the Kingsroad, and Jon turned his mare south.

Oberyn went north.
Jon gaped at him, then looked to the sky to ensure he hadn’t somehow mistaken the direction…but no. They’d come from the west—so they would turn right at the Kingsroad.

“Wait! But—why are you going that way?”

“Did I not tell you?” Oberyn looked over his shoulder, a wide smile on his lips. “I came to the North because I was bored. Are you not curious about the Wall? I, for one, have never been to the ‘end of the world.’”

The man began to whistle, turning back around, getting farther away as Jon simply stared at him. Finally, the young boy spurred his horse and came up beside the Prince. He squinted up at his nonchalant face. “And—and then Dorne, right?”

Oberyn smiled, and Jon felt his stomach hollow. “Ah, broody boy. Where is your sense of adventure?”

Jon gaped at him, shocked. “But—but you told father—”

“That you will be fostered in Dorne,” Oberyn shrugged. “And so you will. But you are my squire, not Dorne’s.” Oberyn grinned at him, carefree.

“Do not worry so, broody boy. We shall get to Dorne. Eventually.” He spurred his horse and took off at a gallop, laughing as he picked up speed. The black stallion, with it’s red mane, leapt over a fallen log, to his rider’s glee.

Jon Snow swallowed, mouth dry, watching Oberyn ride away. Why did he feel like with this man ‘eventually’ could mean years?

Was it too late to choose Howland Reed?

*****

A woman with in a red mask was leading Daenerys through the cliffs of Dragonstone.

“Come,” she whispered, voice gentle and terrible. The words resonated, wrapping around the girl and holding her tightly—suffocating her. Daenerys didn’t want to follow, she wanted to turn around and go back to her room, to safety, to avoid these cliffs and that woman and the things she was leading her towards.

But the silver princess was unable to heed her own desires, and her feet began to follow the stranger, unable to do anything else. The landscape passed as if it were floating past her, faster and faster, more rapidly than should have been possible.

They were getting closer!

“Help me!” Daenerys called, scared. She wanted to go back!

“Come,” the woman said again, far in the distance, only glancing back once as if Daenerys could somehow do otherwise. The princess began to cry—she didn’t want this, any of it!

“No—no!”

Daenerys?

“Please! Please, I don’t want to!”
Suddenly the woman was right in front of her, masked face nearly touching her own, eyes boring into her own. “To go forward, you must go back.”

“No!”

“M’lady!” Tyene yelled, shaking her shoulders as Daenerys jerked awake, screaming. The silver princess recoiled, pushing her friend back in instinctive panic. Tyene fell to the floor, grunting in pain, and the girl shivered on the bed, hugging herself tightly. She was crying—great heaving sobs.

“I—I’m sorry,” Danerys whispered, unable to move and help Tyene up. The blond girl slowly rose, gazing at her Lady carefully.

“A night terror?” Tyene guessed, sitting down and hesitantly touching Daenerys’s unbound hair in comfort. The other girl loved the young princess’s hair—she would often spend hours brushing it while they chatted about anything and everything. It was one of the younger girls’ favorite moments between them. Tyene didn’t seem quite as…careful, in those instances.

“Yes,” the silver princess whispered. Carefully, she leaned closer to Tyene. “A dream.”

The same dream...

Tyene wrapped her arms around the girl, cradling her gently. “Don’t you worry, m’lady. The Father will protect us in times of turmoil.”

“Me too?” she asked, carefully. “You know I don’t believe like you do.”

“You are his child, nevertheless.” Tyene stroked her hair, humming softly. Daenerys gradually stopped shaking.

The young girl didn’t believe in the gods—like cousin Stannis, she believed they weren’t very useful in the end. But she rather liked Tyene’s interpretation of the Faith: one god, with seven faces. One god, who can be anything he or she wanted. It sounded really nice, although, Daenerys thought she’d rather be a god than worship one. Then she, too, could just do whatever she wanted.

I could go to all the Kingdoms, to Essos. I could see everything, meet so many people and learn so much. I could take people with me to, and no one would be mean to us ever again.

I could meet my brother...

“What was it about?” Tyene asked carefully, and Daenerys finally pulled away. The maid raised her hand, with a piece of smooth cloth in it, and wiped her charges tears away.

Daenerys paused for an endless moment, staring into her friend’s eyes. “A woman was telling me…forcing me…to follow her. I don’t want to go, Tyene. I don’t.”

The girl smiled, blue gaze gentle. “It’s only a dream, m’lady. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

Daenerys smiled hollowly and nodded. Over her friend’s shoulder, she stared at the fire roaring in the hearth. Tyene didn’t understand, nobody did. One day, Daenerys had to follow that woman.

And one day, she would.
Dragon’s Interlude

Chapter Summary

Letters, wishes, realizations, and changes.

Princess Daenerys,

To a bastard, many people are mean. Do not concern yourself with it, there were also good things about my life. Things I would never have experienced had I not been betrothed to you. I am very lucky, you understand.

About Jaime Lannister, I have only heard bad things about him. My father says any man who breaks his oath is a bad person. But Jaime Lannister saved so many people with his actions, so I don’t know what to think. Perhaps you can tell me more of his story if you speak to him? But be wary as well, because he is still an oathbreaker, and that is a serious crime.

I sometimes dream of my mother, although I don’t know who she is. I’ve hoped and wondered about her since I was small—she has to be a wonderful person, for my father would not break his honor with anyone. I have a suspicion, but I cannot share it now. This is why I think I understand—you want a father, just as I want a mother. I hope I’m saying this well. I will be honest as I can with you, I swear it.

Prince Oberyn Martell is good with a sword, but he is very old, with grey in his hair. Nearly forty. And he is nothing like Lord Baratheon. I do not think they got along at all. I will ask him to tell me stories of his long life, and share them with you. We are leaving in the morning, on the way to Dorne. I will send you another letter when we reach Moat Cailin.

I hope you remain well,

Jon Snow

*****

Dear Jon,

How people treat each other in this place is truly terrible. I wish someone could do something. Like maybe make new rules. Then people could be happier.

I will talk more with Ser Jaime, although I feel very mixed when I think of him. But I also want to know the full story, and I will share it with you when I do. Don’t worry, I’m going to have my guard, Ser Justin of House Masley, with me at all times. I don’t think Ser Jaime would harm me, however. I make him guilty, I think.

Thank you for understanding about my father. Wishing for a mother and a father is strange, because I see how people are with strangers and how people are with family. I wonder how my family would have been like, if we’d been together. I hope you find your mother some day, Jon. I hope she is everything you want.

Also, of course, Prince Oberyn is old! That’s why he has so many interesting stories. I have asked
Cousin Stannis about the man, but all I got in return is that he is ‘difficult.’ I don’t know what that means! But if cousin Stannis thinks so, then he must be a difficult person. I hope he isn’t one of the mean people! Tell me, and I will tell my cousin, and he will write to Lord Stark, and then you can go with someone else.

How long does it take to get to Moat Cailin? Tell me about the path. I have asked my cousin, but he does not pay attention to things like that! And tell me what our castle looks like, because all he said was “impenetrable.” That is fine and all, but it is pretty?

Write back soon,

Daenerys.

*****

“Why do you always stare at the fire?” Steffon asked, laying on the rug in her bedchamber. He had a wooden horse and rider in each hand and was hosting a joust on the floor. She blinked at him, have almost forgotten that he’d wandered in here after his lessons with Maester Cressen, as he sometimes did. Tyene had left to get them all some lunch.

“Don’t you think it’s pretty?” she asked her little cousin, with his straight black hair and vivid dark violet eyes, and gestured to the flickering fire. Myra always said that he’d be as handsome as his father one day. Steffon was often pleased by the comparison, although he’d begun to protest when his mother cooed over him when he was in the presence of the other boys.

Myra was amused by this turn of events, but hid the fact and mournfully accused him of ‘breaking her heart.’ Steffon had been guilty for a whole day, before Daenerys had taken pity on him and told him that Myra was just teasing. His insulted little face had made her giggle.

Steffon scrunched his nose and looked at the fire. “It’s hot. Your room is always too hot, Dany.”

“Dany?” she squinted at him, baffled. He’d never called her that before.

“Ryelle calls you that, I know. She always goes ‘Dany, Dany’. It’s easier to say than Daenerys,” Steffon informed her helpfully, nodding.

She frowned at him. She liked her name—it was Targaryen and powerful. Dany…sounded like a girl. But, it was certainly easier to say, she decided.

“I like the heat,” she rebuked. And it was true—the princess loved the heat, but only Myra knew how much. “Perhaps it’s the dragon blood.”

Steffon shrugged and went back to his joust. “I don’t feel anything different.”

She stared at him, then looked to the fire. Would…Does Viserys feel it, too?

Daenerys shook her head, slid off her chair, and lay on her stomach in front of Steffon. She stretched out her hand, expectant. He handed over one of the wooden knights without protest.

“I’m Aemon the Dragonknight,” Steffon informed her, grinning.

Daenerys laughed, “Then I shall be Daemon Blackfyre, and we will battle for the throne!”

Steffon scrunched his face seriously. “In the name of Queen Naerys, I will defeat you, pretender!”

“Never!” Daenerys cried, making her voice rough.
The two giggled and laughed as they forced their knights to battle, positioning the wooden figurines so they held the laces straight and would collide with each others’ breastplates when forced together.

Myra entered the room carrying Ryelle, and Tyene was beside her with a tray of food. On the ground, the children were arguing whether Aemon’s lance had truly pierced Daemon’s armor and delivered a killing blow, or whether the man had in fact missed.

“We seem to have disrupted a Rebellion, my dear,” Myra said to Tyene, who nodded soberly.

“Can our two champions call a parley and eat before resuming your war?” the blonde maid asked, eyes twinkling in amusement.

Two pairs of violent eyes met each other suspiciously, before they both nodded. Tyene set the plate of fruits, bread, and cheeses on Dany’s small table, and they all gathered around it. In the beginning, Tyene had been reluctant to join the family, saying it wasn’t her ‘place’ but Daenerys had just frowned at her. “It’s your place if I say it is.”

“Dany!” the nearly one-year-old Ryelle giggled, bouncing happily in her mother’s lap. She stretched out her arms, but Daenerys dodged her, laughing.

“No! Last time you pulled out half my hair!” the princess protested, raising her hand to shield herself. Ryelle giggled and bounced.

“She is in the grabbing stage,” Myra signed. “My poor hair will never be the same.”

No one mentioned hiring a wet-nurse. Myra never would.

“Was I like that?” Steffon asked, curious.

Myra smiled at him. “No, my sweet. You were a very conservative baby. Half the time I worried you were dead.”

Steffon frowned, not sure if him being obedient was a good or bad thing. “Well, at least I didn’t pull out anyone’s hair!” he defended himself.

“Very true,” his mother grinned, leaning over to kiss his cheek. “Your sister may give me even more heart attacks than Daenerys did when she finally learned to walk.”

Dany’s mouth dropped open in affront. She wanted to protest but…well, she remembered a few times at Dragonstone where she’d nearly driven Myra and Stannis to murder. One time, for example, she’d decided it would be interesting to climb onto the back of one of the stone dragons. And because the only ones big enough for such a thing were at the gates far below the castle, she’d disappeared for a whole day in order to accomplish her goal. It had certainly caused a panic.

Well…at least I managed to climb one. Stannis had found her asleep on of the tall dragons, exhausts, and unable to climb down. He’d heaved the girl over his shoulder and made sure to take extra exaggerated steps back up the stairs in punishment. Daenerys still felt sea sick when she remembered.

So many stairs… She shuddered. Her ancestors were evil.

“So, when are we leaving? I don’t even remember Dragonstone,” Steffon pouted.

“By week’s end,” Myra responded, popping a melon wedge in her mouth.
“Dragonstone is very grey,” Daenerys informed him, with the air of an older, wiser sibling. “And covered in dragons! It’s very impressive.”

Steffon’s eyes were large. “Real ones? Mario—” his friend, a stable master’s son—“tells me that his father was here when the throne room had real dragon bones. But the King destroyed them all.” Steffon scowled, and Daenerys knew there was no one in this family that saw the king favourably. Myra urged them to keep quiet about that in public, however.

Daenerys shook her head, frowning. “They’re carved of stone. I wish we could see real dragon bones. Why did the king have to destroy them?”

“What a waste,” Tyene murmured, biting into a roll covered in some berries. “Dragon bones are very rare, you know. There are people that would pay much, especially in Essos, for such weapons.”

They stared at her, and Tyene paused, before smiling. “I overheard some men in the armory speaking of how the Dothraki use dragonbone bows. They don’t burn, and they’re lighter than wood. I remembered because I know how much you love stories about Essosi cultures,” she smiled at Daenerys, taking another bite of her roll.

The silver princess brightened immediately, and Myra and Steffon returned to their own food. “How clever! There must be so many more dragonbone weapons in Essos.”

But I’ll probably never see them.

A squeezing pressure began to form in her chest. Bones—that’s the only thing that remained of the dragons.

Of Valyria.

Of my family.

The princess looked up at Myra, who carefully wiped some food from Steffon’s mouth, chastening him gently. A mother’s love.

Daenerys looked back down, smile fading.

*****

On their trip North, they would often find shelter at some farm or deserted home, or camp out amongst the trees. Jon learned to light a fire, and it became one of his duties, as well as cooking the food Oberyn would return with. He’d protested at first: he wasn’t a maid or a common cook! This wasn’t the duty of a squire!

“You are my squire, spoiled boy.” Oberyn reclined back against a tree. “Your duties are what I say they are. Do not tell me you cannot even do what a ‘common cook’ can.”

A bit ashamed, Jon had meekly remained silent as Oberyn showed him the process of skinning a rabbit. He’d burned it the first time, to his mortification, but the Prince had just snorted and noted that it tasted yards better than some of the things he’d survived on in the past. Jon was awed, and felt a bit bad for besmirching the man in his letter to Daenerys.

Slowly, in no particular hurry, they’d gotten closer and closer over the course of a month. The temperature dropped steadily. The homes and farms became scarcer and scarcer. Then they’d ended up traveling through the eerie blackness of the Wolf’s Wood, taking turns sleeping as wolves bayed in the night. Soon, they’d reached the towering mountains to the west. Snow had covered their
peaks, and Jon had wondered if the temperature ever rose high enough in this part of the world for the snow to melt.

*How much colder it must be beyond the Wall!*

And then, finally, they’d seen the Wall itself rising in the distance. He’d been awed and genuinely speechless, watching it get taller the closer they got, until he could no longer see the top amongst the clouds. How could Brandon the Builder have constructed such an aweing sight? Jon suddenly believed, more that he’d ever before, that old Nan’s stories must be real. Who but a giant could lift such huge blocks of ice? Who but the children of the forest had magic enough to raise the wall so high?

He’d begun to feel excited, eager to see the Night’s Watch, the famed brotherhood that protected the Seven Kingdom’s from Wildlings. He remembered reading stories of Queen Alysanne’s visit to the wall, atop her dragon Silverwing, and how she’d expanded the territory. All his life he’d imagined the imposing Castle Black, manned by hundreds of somber, honorable men.

So when Jon got his first real look at Castle Black—falling into disrepair, manned by a scrawny group of men dressed in black—he couldn’t believe his eyes. None of the brothers looked like the ones he remembered occasionally coming to Winterfell. As a boy, he remembered Mance Rayder and his party coming to meet with his Father. The slim, well-built man held himself tall and dignified. Jon remembered being impressed.

That’s when he’d first considered abandoning his responsibilities and escaping to the wall. There, he’d thought, he could do good for the realm. He could protect people from wildlings and be an equal amongst his Sworn Brothers. At the Night’s Watch, surely no one would care who Jon had been, and he could live his life with honor, just like his father.

*It would have been freedom.*

“This place is worse than I had heard,” Oberyn murmured, looking up at the gate as it opened to reveal a run-down courtyard.

“You knew it would be like this?” Jon whispered, looking wide eyes at the sneering men and their decrepit faces.

“Everyone knows, but I am beginning to think you did not. One more think Eddard Stark concealed,” Oberyn remarked, watching the disappointed way Jon looked at everything. “Well, it is good for you to see it, then. A man should know what he is in store for before he chooses.”

Jon shot him a look, frowning. “What?”

Oberyn looked at him knowingly. “I have seen the far-away look in your eyes, Jon Snow. It is what drove me around the world. I do not regret my adventures, of course, but even I was never foolish enough to contemplate giving up women. An atrociously cruel fate, would you not agree, Lord Commander?” Oberyn smirked at the man who approached.

He was broad-shouldered and tall, imposing, with a balding head and a white beard. There was a resolute, clear look in his eyes as he scanned Oberyn up and down in suspicion, mouth set in a careful line. Two equally grim men flanked him, one of which was giving Jon a look that suggested he was a bitter, harsh man.

“Oberyn Martell,” The Lord Commander muttered, voice gruff like a bear’s. “When your raven mentioned that you ‘might’ pay a visit, all those months ago, I’d thought it was some jest.” Then he
shot Jon a look, while the bitter man just looked hatefully away. “And then we received a redirected missive from Moat Cailin, with a note from Benjen Stark saying that that it was a private letter from Daenerys Targaryen, intended for her betrothed. After that, we began to expect you.”

Jon perked up a bit. He’d hopped Uncle Benjen would send her letter here, especially after Oberyn admitted that he’d sent a Raven to Moat Cailin saying that he’d ‘probably’ head to Castle Black. Jon’s stomach had protested annoying her by not responding.

“I have not had to report my whereabouts since I was a boy in my Princess Mother’s house.” The prince had grumbled.

Oberyn signed and shot Jon an exasperated look. “Why is it that so many men here forget my title? It is not difficult: Westeros does not have many princes.”

Jon just blinked at him, and Oberyn turned away. “Jeor Mormont, I’m sure you have room for my young squire and I.”

“How long are you staying?” The man asked, no attempt at politeness.

“A week, a month, a year?” Oberyn suggested, heedless of Jon’s wide-eyed protest, and placed his arm casually on his hip. “Do not worry so, Lord Commander. You will not even know we are here.”

Jeor Mormont’s face, if possible, grew even grimmer. Jon didn’t believe Oberyn, either.

*****

Stannis places one last thin line upon his map, and then sat back with an exhale, staring at the layout of the sewer systems. Every passage way was now marked with a thin line, completing the task at last. Over the past two months, his men had searched every corner of the city, dressed carefully in peasant guard. They’d searched under the gates, the castle, the Sept of Baelor, and the Dragonpit. Nothing.

Stannis could almost believe Jaime Lannister’s tale had been a lie, but there was a peculiar scent in some of the areas—especially under the Sept—that reeked of alchemist’s brew. He’d gone to the guild himself, inquiring about Wildfire, and had been shown a small remaining casket in their vault. The scent matched.

Seven hells, Aerys Targaryen. You truly were Mad.

Stannis could finally rest easily; as Jaime had said, all the Wildfire in the city had long been disposed of. He turned to the man now, seated across from him, face set in his regular arrogant sneer. The boy’s attitude often challenged Stannis’s patience.

“Tywin Lannister is indeed a meticulous man.” Stannis admired that about him, at least. “Was he the only one you told?”

“The King and Jon Arryn knew. Varys too, probably, but who is to say, with him? It’s part of why his Grace despises the Targaryen’s so much. He believed only they are terrible enough to plan such a thing.” The younger man’s voice was dismissive.

“And you do not?”
Jamie scoffed. “History is riddled with terrible men—my brother Tyrion delights in reading all about them and then telling me their acts—in detail. He likes it when my face goes green,” Jaime muttered.

Stannis could agree with that. Power wasn’t kind. “Robert and Arryn: Are they why no one knows? Tywin Lannister does not seem like a man who would let his son’s reputation suffer.”

Jaime grimaced, looking away. “My father agreed to keep silent, with the condition that I not be sent to the Wall. Jon Arryn wanted to avoid a panic, and agreed. Can’t rule over an empty city, after all.”

So that's why Robert had kept Jaime in his employ, despite the protest of many. Stannis could understand Arryn's logic: just the possibility of Wildfire underneath his family had nearly driven him to abandon everything and leave. And Stannis was not an emotional man.

“Not even my father can ignore the King’s order. Our men were the ones who got rid of the stuff. If news got out, His Grace would know who to blame.”

“That is why you kept it secret, then.”

Jaime stared at him, mouth twisted in bitterness. “That. And the fact that no one ever asked. Well,” he laughed, tinged with disbelief. “until your ward, who insists on following me around and asking pointless questions.” Jaime looked at him, half disbelieving. “I can’t get her to leave.”

“You get used to it,” Stannis muttered dryly, sighing. Daenerys was tenacious, and he was worried the wrong people would start to comment on her recent interest in Jaime Lannister.

They stared at each other for a moment, then leaned back, awkward. Neither of them was used to the idea of…male comradeship. It was a bloody uncomfortable affair.

“I hear you’re leaving for Dragonstone,” Jaime tried, clearing his throat and lifting his chin. “Finally getting a break from this gods-awful place. And what’s this rumor about that ore of yours?”

Stannis hesitated. “Come along and see for yourself.” He, too, cleared his throat. “It will be useful for the Kingsguard as well. Robert has plenty of other men to guard himself. And he is not the most... mobile king.”

And this way, Daenerys could approach the man without giving Stannis constant paranoia that her actions would somehow harm her. The Lannister boy may also feel more secure in a different location. Perhaps she’d find whatever she was looking for and lose interest.

Jaime snorted, leaning back. “I’d have to get permission from Selmy.”

Stannis frowned at the lack of respect, but let it go. “Then do so. I planned to gift Robert anyway, but this way you can carry news of the event yourself, and convince them.”

Jaime raised his brow sardonically. “You think the other members of the Kingsguard would listen to me? Are you blind, Baratheon?”

Stannis met his gaze frankly. “Kingslayer you may be, Lannister. But all men know of and envy your skill. You wouldn’t take something like armor and weaponry lightly. That, at least, is not be doubted. Unless there is some other reason you can’t leave?”

Jaime opened his mouth, sputtering, but nothing came out. It seemed Stannis had finally rendered the man speechless.

And so, days later, House Baratheon of Dragonstone, as well as a faintly bemused lion, departed for
home. Before they’d left, Daenerys had informed him unhappily that the Queen had been in a particularly foul mood lately, and that the silver princess was thankful they could leave.

Jaime Lannister had looked away, mouth twisted with a mix of complicated emotions.
Dear Princess Daenerys,

I’ve always wondered what it would be like, if one day someone just stood up and tried to change the bad things about this kingdom. It’s a ridiculous fantasy, I know. But I think I could support such a thing, although my support wouldn’t mean much anyway.

I admit, I do not know very much about what occurs during the Rebellion. My father lost many of his family members during those years, and he doesn’t like to speak of it. Maester Luwin, who educated up in Winterfell, would also gloss over the events. Would it be too much to ask that you tell me the story? Only if you are comfortable, of course! It’s probably not something you want to talk about. I’m sorry.

I understand about family. I have never felt as if I belonged in Winterfell. Despite my brother accepting me, I could never forget that I was not trueborn. Sometimes, I wonder what life would have been like if my father had chosen my mother. It’s a ridiculous idea, I know. He was already married when I was born, and my father would never abandon his wife. He would not even abandon his bastard, that is how honorable he is. He is respected throughout the North: the best man I know. Still, I wonder sometimes what my life would have been like, if he’d been different. It’s a selfish thought, I know.

Prince Oberyn is a good man, although very unpredictable. As you have requested, I’ve asked him stories of his past. In his youth, traveling throughout Essos, Prince Oberyn founded his own mercenary company, and traveled between the Free Cities and the Slave Cities, seeing the world and fighting for pay. My father says mercenaries are dishonorable, but Prince Oberyn is a good man, I think: although a difficult one.

We are not in Moat Cailin: Prince Oberyn has taken me to the Wall. We are now in Castle Black. I am sorry if this letter has come late, but I did not know of his plans. The Wall is an amazing thing to see, so tall the top is hidden in the clouds. I hope the Brothers of the Night’s Watch allow us up there. The Watch is not at all what I expected, but I am glad I know the truth. The path to the Wall was at first flatlands, which gave into the dense Wolf’s Wood. I have learned to light a fire and skin a rabbit. I’m sorry, you probably didn’t need to know that, it’s not something for a girl’s ears.

As for Moat Cailin, so far only the foundation has been set, but the stone is a luminescent white, and one of the architects, Thoreqor of Myr, is determined that the castle will be a thing of beauty. I have seen the plans, and they are very impressive. I think it will please you.

I hope you remain well,

Jon Snow

*****
The people of Dragonstone didn’t like Jaime Lannister. The young Lion expected as much; he’d become used to the scorn, and didn’t know why he’d expected it to be different here. It was a needed wake up call.

_Idiot. You really think that just because their Lord invited you, they’d change their tune?_

Even if people found out about the Mad King’s plot, Jaime knew there were many who’d just think the words a lie. _Especially_ if they’d been Targaryen loyalists. Often, the truth was too terrible to face.

_The fact that the little Dragon actually believed me…_

Jaime didn’t know what to make of it. He’d expected her to deny the information, to just keep it to herself, to convince herself that he was just a cruel liar. Very few people, Jaime knew, would face a truth like that head-on. To know the reality of your father’s evil was a terrible thing.

Even now, when Jaime recalled what Tywin Lannister had allowed during the Sack, he preferred to just banish the thoughts, to convince himself it was just soldiers acting on their own. When he’d learned the fate of Crown Princess Elia and the children, he’d held onto the conviction that the ones responsible had acted alone. That his father had only taken responsibility because they’d been _his_ men. Or perhaps it was the Mad King who’d _really_ ordered the execution.

Their fate _wasn’t_ Jaime’s fault. He’d saved the city. _I saved everyone!_

_“Protect them, Jaime. This I ask of you, my friend.”_ Shining Rhaegar, atop a steed as black as his armor. Rubies glinted at his breast. _“When I return, the world will be a different place.”_

He forced the memory away.

Jamie stood upon one of Dragonstone’s many cliffs, the imposing fortress behind him. He stared out at the Blackwater, in the direction of King’s Landing, his gut churning with a mixture of feeling.

He wanted to get back to Cersei. He should never have left her. Swayed by the words of Stannis Baratheon. He felt sick over the betrayal.

She’d thrown her wine cup at him when she’d learned of it, enraged.

But now he couldn’t leave. Robert himself had ordered Jaime to accompany his brother.

_“Let’s see what this ore of his is all about. Get on with you, Kingslayer! King’s Landing will be a more pleasant place without you skulking about.”_

_“Fat pig,”_ Jaime snarled.

_“Who is?”_

Jaime jumped, turning around with his instinctive sneer. Daenerys stood a distance away, making her way towards him casually. Her blond maid, who always kept her face lowered in Jaime’s presence, stood behind her mistress alongside the smiling Ser Justin. He, at least, no longer scowled at Jaime, but he didn’t attempt to get any closer, either.

Jaime sighed in irritation. _“Do you know that you are the most annoying girl I have ever met? I’ve already told you everything about the Sack! What more is there?”_

_Just leave me alone! Your face carries too many ghosts._

Daenerys wrinkled her nose at him. _“You’re always so unpleasant. Why can’t you just be nice?”_
Jaime gaped at her. “Nice? Nice! Do you even know who I am?”

“Kingslayer,” she said, nose in the air. “I don’t know why that means you have to be so grumpy all the time. My betrothed is a Snow, you know. He’s faced a lot of mean people all his life, but he’s nice. And I’ve had to grow up in King’s Landing, so I know all about being hated for your name. But you’re a Lannister, so no one can do mean things to you! You really should stop being so bitter about everything. It makes your face ugly.”

Behind her, the maid snorted, and immediately covered her mouth, turning away. Ser Justin didn’t try to hide his snicker. They both halted when Daenerys frowned at them.

Jaime stared at her, flabbergasted. People had called Jaime Lannister many things in his life, but no one had ever called him ugly. Warrior help him, but he was rather enchanted. “Do you know that you’re a very brutal child?”

Daenerys eyed him petulantly, not sure if it was an insult because of the admiring way he said it. She turned to her maid and took a blanket from her arms, then presented it to Jaime. He blinked at the blue cloth, then at her.

“Lay it on the ground,” she said imperiously, rolling her eyes. He narrowed her eyes at her.

“What? Why?”

“Well, we can’t sit on the grass to eat. It’s wet,” she informed him, as if it was obvious as he was an idiot. That’s when he noticed that her knight held a basket in his hand.

*Stannis Baratheon, I find myself pitying you. Or perhaps admiring.*

He nevertheless did as bid, and all four of them too up corners of the blanket. Ser Justin placed the basket in the middle, and the maid opened it and handed pieces of bread and ham to everyone. She still refused to meet Jaime’s eyes.

He didn’t concern himself with it. She was just some lowborn woman. Who cared what she thought of him?

They ate in silence for a while, and Daenerys watched the Blackwater, eyes far away.

“You’re a rather unusual girl, you know that? I’d have thought a ward of Stannis Baratheon would turn out shy and retreating.”

Daenerys scrunched up her nose in confusion, violet eyes questioning. The wind blew her hair around her face, draping over her sky-blue gown, trimmed with white lace. “Why?”

Jaime raises his brow. “He’s a harsh taskmaster, your guardian. All Seven Kingdom’s know of his coldness. I’m surprised he allows you so much freedom. I don’t know of any other girl bold enough to call a Lannister ‘ugly,’” he scowled as he remembered. Ridiculous.

Daenerys rolled her eyes. “People don’t know anything. Cousin Stannis is really nice, but his face is always stuck in one position and it makes him look mean. Also, he doesn’t talk much. You know, you of all people should judge another by how they act.”

Jaime blinked at her, speechless.

“He and Myra let Maester Cressen teach me about whatever I want to know. And he doesn’t like the Faith—sorry, Tyene—because he thinks it’s just babble written to force people to act a certain way.
So he doesn’t care if I’m not like the other girls, but I don’t want to be anyway. They only learn boring stuff, although needlework can be fun,” she admitted. “Also, Jon, my betrothed, says that Cousin Stannis was really nice to him, and not many people are. So you see, cousin Stannis is a good person.”

Jaime processed the information, which was inconsistent with his general interpretation of Stannis Baratheon. He remembered the man, covered in blood, after the Greyjoy Rebellion, mouth set in a cruel line. An image completely at odds with the man Daenerys described. Also, Jaime knew for a fact that Stannis was implacable and inflexible; driven only by duty.

“How is it you know what your bastard thinks?” Jaime finally asked, recalling her word. He’d consider Baratheon another day.

She glared at him. “Don’t call him that.”

Jaime snorted. “You can’t deny the truth, little girl. The Bastard of Winterfell, the only stain on Eddard Stark’s honor. And a future lord? The people of Winterfell must love having him around, especially it’s Lady. She finally got fed up with Stark and retreated to Riverrun, I hear.”

Daenerys frowned. “I haven’t heard anything like that. Jon and I write letters, and he’s never mentioned Lord Stark’s wife.”

“Chances are she’s like any other woman and hates her husband’s whelp.” Jaime took a bite of his bread. Cersei would no doubt kill any of Robert’s bastards if the man was fool enough to bring them to court. He remembered an incident when the King has mentioned some bastard from the Eyrie, but didn’t remember the details.

Daenerys looked down, worried. Jaime found her relationship with the bastard interesting to see. Then she shook her head. “Maybe so, but Jon isn’t at Winterfell anymore. He’s squiring for Prince Oberyn. Jon likes him, so the prince isn’t a mean person,” she said, smiling up at him in relief.

Jaime nearly choked on his food, coughing. Ser Justin beat him on the back quickly, and handed him a flask of wine. Jaime drowned it, and then stared at Daenerys in shock.

“W-what? Oberyn Martell?”

She frowned at him, perplex. “Yes, why?”

Jaime just stared. How had he not known about this? Did his father know? He must—it was Tywin Lannister. Was this a coincidence?

Jaime looked at Daenerys with doubt. “How much do you know about the Sack? About the old Crown Princess?”

She looked sad and confused. “My brother’s wife and children were…something bad happened to them. Why?”

*She doesn’t know who Elia was. Does the bastard?* Jaime shook his head. “Nevermind.”

She looked at him suspiciously, and Jaime could see the gears turning in her head. No doubt as soon as she left, she’d go straight to her Maester. Jaime cursed himself. He seemed to be single handily supplying this girl with all the information she’d ever need!

They were silent for a while, Jaime shooting looks back down the path, chewing faster hoping he could leave soon. He needed to write to his father. But it seemed like Daenerys was finally getting
around to the real purpose of this strange interaction.

“You knew my brother,” she finally murmured, meeting his eyes. There was a wistfulness there. Jaime’s stomach clenched, and he looked away.

“Yes.”

“Would you…tell me stories? Only Myra knew him, but she was much younger. And I don’t like to ask her because she gets sad.”

Jaime chewed for a while, stalling. Thinking of Rhaegar always reminded him of his failed promise. Part of wanted to just get up and walk away, but another part…

“He was my friend. The best swordsman I’ve ever seen—I never could beat him. Well, second best, perhaps. Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, could best him half the time. But it’s difficult to say who was better. Rhaegar was also a master at the joust—he could unseat anyone. He won many tourneys.”

Jaime had always looked up to Rhaegar—he remembered sparring with the man, laughing despite his failures, and swearing that one day he would best him. Jaime would never know if his skill ever matched the giants’ own.

“Was he—kind?” Daenerys eyes shined, hopeful. “I know what they say, what the King says, about Lady Lyanna. But Myra denies the story. So, I hoped that perhaps…” the look in her eye was nearly painful to see. Ser Justin and the maid looked at her with pity in their eyes.

“Rhaegar’s skill with a lance was only bested by his ability to sing. He hated war, he hated fighting. He wanted to sing and make others merry, although he himself was frequently melancholy. He was loved for his kindness,” Jaime said, almost gentle. “Whatever happened with the Stark girl…well, history is written by the winners, as my brother always says.”

Daenerys looked at him, tears in her eyes, and she smiled widely.

Perhaps I couldn’t protect your children, Rhaegar, nor your mother…but your sister is still here, and her heart is too kind for this world.

He’d have to teach her not to be so trusting of people.

*****

Oberyn Martell had been planning his revenge for nearly ten years. Everything he and his brother had done until that point was with vengeance in mind.

One day, the Lannister’s and the King would pay for what they’d done to his beloved sister. One day, Oberyn would drive his spear through the heart of those responsible, but only after taking everything they held dear from them.

One day, the world would be a different place, and the Lions and the Stag would burn under the Sun’s might.

He leaned casually against the railing overlooking Castle Black’s training yard, watching his squire battle with the new recruits. The men he faced, the scum of the kingdoms, played dirty and were vicious in taking any advantage they saw. Jon Snow was learning that real warfare, real battle, wasn’t the pretty sparing his Master-at-Arms had trained him in.
This world had no honor, and Oberyn would hammer that idea into the boy’s head before the ridiculous ideals of Ned Stark killed him.

Below, Jon panted, sweat covering his face, and arm shaking as he held the practice sword. The older recruit in front of him, some cutthroat from King’s Landing—the shit city—was taunting and laughing at the boy.

Jon viscously thrust forward, hitting the other man across his face, and dropped low to hit another strike at his knee. His opponent went down, cursing in pain.

Had the sword been real, he’d be dead. Truly a talented boy. Oberyn was increasingly convinced he must have Arthur Dayne’s blood. Well, in the end, whore or highborn didn’t matter—the boy was betrothed to a Dragon.

Jon looked up at Oberyn, and he nodded down approvingly. A tiny smile graced the morose boy’s face. Oberyn did not feel guilty for using him—in the end, they were all pawns, and he was at least giving this boy lessons that he should have learned years ago.

“That is enough,” Oberyn called down. “Go clean yourself and eat. There is no point humiliating these pathetic Night’s Watch recruits any longer. Ser Alliser’s training has done that enough on its own.”

The Master-At-Arms, who’d been scowling from the side as he watched, shot Oberyn a vicious glare. He smiled slowly in return. The man was simply too easy to anger. Who was Oberyn to resist such a treat?

Grateful, Jon lowered his weapon.

His opponent took the opportunity to thrust his wooden sword up at the boy, attempting to punish him.

Jon ducked away just in time to avoid a painful hit, but his arm faced the brunt of the blow. He cried out, eyes wide as he held the injury. Jon retreated quickly. “You can’t do that. I already won.”

He looked to Oberyn for confirmation, but the Viper just tilted his head. “Let this be a lesson, boy. A true enemy will look for any way to kill you, and real war has no rules. Only dead men expect them.”

Jon frowned in denial but didn’t respond. He hurried away, shooting his opponent an angry look. Yes, the boy had talent, but he kept expecting for the world to be fair. Curious, considering his upbringing.

“The Sun has come to the Wall,” an old, weathered voice murmured, and Oberyn looked over to see the blind Maester of Castle Black approach him, with one of his stewards at his side—a horribly ugly man with pockmarks all over his face.

*Can there not be one attractive man in this shithole? With men like this, no wonder the North is so prudish.*

“Master Aemon,” Oberyn greeted with an interested hum “You are mistaken. My brother is the Sun, I am simply a Viper.” The old man smiled kindly, his opaque eyes focusing unerringly on Oberyn. This was not a man to take casually, the Viper sensed. No one that had lived as long as the Maester had was a fool.

“There is nothing simple about you, my boy. Stories of you reach me even here, at the end of the
world. ‘When the Sun comes to the Wall.’ An old companion said those words to me, many years ago, and I have been waiting for any sign.”

Oberyn watched him carefully. “I have never planned to come here, so whomever told you such a thing surely meant another.”

The old man chuckled, coming closer. He reached out, and found Oberyn’s hand, patting it gently. “We will see.” The Viper felt as if he was a boy again, with no understanding of the world.

“You are an interesting man, maester. Tell me, who were you in your past life?”

Aemon smiled. “Ah, what a question. I was just a young boy who chose a different path. Send your squire to me, my boy. A young one like that needs a maester, and you never did complete your chain.”

He continued past, Oberyn’s gaze trailing after him.

*****

When Jon went to meet Master Aemon, he was exhausted and his whole body ached. He wanted to leave, but Oberyn’s plans, if he had any, were a mystery to Jon. In the two months they’d been at the Wall, Oberyn—who must surely be trying to kill Jon—had forced him to spar with the recruits every day, for hours. When he wasn’t doing that, he helped the Brothers cook, and helped organize and clean the weapons in the armory. For his part, the Viper seemed to just laze around and occasionally went out to hunt. The one upside was when he’d been allowed to accompany Oberyn up to the top of the Wall, and would never forget the amazing sight he’d seen. Only on dragon-back had anyone had such a wondrous view, with the North stretched out on one side and the snow-covered lands of the wildlings on the other.

I want to bring Daenerys here one day, so she may see it as well.

Over the course of his stay, Jon learned much about the Watch, about the system of governing here, and about the horrible crimes men could commit.

Yet he also learned the stories some of the brothers told, of hunger and sickness, of desperation that drove them to steal. Jon had never thought about such a thing before. While at Winterfell his portions were sometimes smaller, he’d never been starving.

I wish someone could do something. The words in Daenerys letter often played through his mind. Like maybe make new rules. Then people could be happier.

He had yet to get a response to his other letter, send nearly seven weeks ago now, and Jon was worried she was angry at his delay. Or maybe the letter had been intercepted? If there was still nothing in another week, he’d send another.

Jon knocked at the door of the rookery, where Master Aemon had his chambers. Oberyn had told Jon to visit, with a note of ‘being careful’. Jon didn’t know what a frail old man could do to him, however.

An ugly man opened the door, “What?”

“Maester Aemon wanted to see me,” Jon said quietly.

“Wait.” The man closed the door in Jon’s face, annoying the boy. After a few moments, he let Jon in and led him to a sitting room. The master, so frail and wrinkled, sat before a roaring fire. “Don’t
make any trouble,” the steward warned, before leaving, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Maester Aemon?” Jon asked, hesitant.

The man turned his head. “Ah, Jon Snow. Come, sit.” He motioned to the other chair, and Jon did as bid.

“Did you know, when I was a boy, I had two paths before me?” the Master began, smiling. He looked at Jon, and the boy felt like Aemon could see him, despite being blind.

“I didn’t, maester.” Jon didn’t know how he could possibly have known that.

“Two very different roads, my boy. North or South. I came here, as you know. Too many enemies down the other path, too many responsibilities. I let my brother handle them instead, for that was who he was. I am a maester, my boy. A maester from birth. My name did not matter as much as who I chose to become.”

Jon was completely perplexed. “I see.”

Aemon chuckled. “You are a Snow from birth, and carry the weight of a title which tells people you are treacherous; that you lust for power.” Jon tensed. “But those are the ideas of others, and the Gods laugh at their plans for you. Tell me yourself, Jon Snow: what type of man will you be?”

Jon was quiet, thinking carefully. He felt that he must answer seriously. “My father is an honorable man, who takes his responsibilities seriously. He has taught me to honor one’s oaths, to face the consequences of one’s actions.”

Aemon smiled. “And shall you be another Eddard Stark?”

“However,” Jon hesitated. “However, sometimes I think the world doesn’t work like my father says it does. I’ve learned a lot in this place, about people, and about life. I want to be honorable like he was, but I also want—I want to understand the world more. To understand people. I-I don’t know how to explain.”

Aemon chucked. “What do you know about a Maester’s chain, my boy?”

Jon blinked at the sudden change in topic, confused. “That it’s made of different metals?”

“Yes, but do you know why that is so?”

Jon shook his head, before realizing the man couldn’t see it. “No, maester.”

“Each metal for a different skill learned, and each skill is a part of the whole. The chain cannot exist without all the part, Jon Snow. Just like Westeros. Do you understand?”

The young boy hesitated, then guessed. “Do you mean people? Here at the Wall, everyone does their own work. At Winterfell, too. Everyone is needed to run the castles, all their different skills.”

Aemon reached over and patted Jon’s hand, pleased. “We are a part of the whole, my boy. And to understand the world, we must learn all its parts, the good and bad.”

“I understand,” Jon said, and he did. The boy raised in Winterfell, who’d never thought of what others felt, was fading.

*****
Tyene Sand had spent her time with Daenerys protecting, watching, and evaluating the young girl. Almost unwillingly, she’d grown to care for the silver princess, and she now began to envision a different future for her young charge. Daenerys’s passion, her visions of the future, and her willingness to listen and to learn were traits Tyene admired.

However, Daenerys was young yet, and her ideals had never been challenged. Anyone could dream when surrounded by a relatively safe life, under the protection of loving guardians. Many people with ideals often didn’t have the strength of character to uphold their beliefs in the face of adversity. That was fine as well; not everyone could be who they wished to be.

So Tyene believed that she must test the small girl. As her ninth Nameday passed, the blonde maid decided that Daenerys was old enough now to meet the challenge. Furthermore, the growing crowd at Dragonstone—highborn and representatives from all the kingdoms present, awaiting the meeting next month—presented her with the perfect opportunity.

It was time to show the realm who Daenerys Stormborn really was.
Viper's Truth

Chapter Summary

The truth, a lesson, and an oath.

Chapter Notes

Busy week! I'll update more tomorrow :)

Dear Jon,

I’m sorry it took so long to respond. Your letter went to King’s Landing, and it took some time to arrive here. We’re in Dragonstone, because cousin Stannis is hosting a meeting with many other houses to introduce this new ore found in the mines. Tobho Mott, a talented smith, managed to uncover its secrets. Apparently, the ore is very impressive, Myra even said it ‘changes the game’; although I’m not sure what that means.

It’s not selfish to desiring a family. At least I hope not. Sometimes, even though I love cousin Stannis, Myra, Steffon, and Ryelle, I wonder about Viserys, my remaining brother, and how he fares across the Narrow Sea. If he even still lives. Between us, I’m the selfish one, for desiring to know him even though I am surrounded by people who love me.

I have another reason for taking so long to respond, and I hope you’re not angry with me for it. You see, after your last letter, I spoke more with Ser Jaime about the Rebellion, and I learned some… complicated information. Do you know of the Sack of King’s Landing? It was when the Lannister army took the city, and when Ser Jaime killed my father to stop the Wildfire. I learned that the army did many terrible things in the city, that they hurt many people. Maester Cressen did not want to tell me, but I am persistent and have asked many of the people who have come to stay with us. All say that it was a horrible time, and that the city was in chaos for many months afterward. Alright, enough stalling, Daenerys!

What I want to tell you, and maybe you already know, is that the Lannister army killed my good sister, Elia, and my niece and nephew, Aegon and Rhaenys. Some people say the soldiers were ordered to do so, ordered to kill them, my Ser Jaime’s father, Tywin Lannister. As I sit here writing this to you, my hand shakes in rage. I must admit, despite wishing to judge Ser Jaime fairly, despite the fact that I rather like him—vanity and all—I now have a harder time looking him in the eye. She was unguarded and alone, Jon, and they were babies. My brother Rhaegar left them all alone, under my father’s watch, and now I cannot say what I feel for him, either. Anger, sadness, disappointment, denial—I have been drowning, and I don’t know what to do. No one wants to tell me how they died, and from that, I know that it must have been terrible.

Beyond the terrible news of the acts themselves, I learned that Robert Baratheon smiled when the bodies of my blood were laid at the feet of his throne. That he didn’t punish any of the responsible parties. How can I look at him now, Jon, and hide my hatred? Could you do it? Tell me how, because I dread returning to King’s Landing and having him see the disgust on my face. Not even
when they hurt me did I feel such anger, and even Myra’s hugs can’t stop it.

These events, while they happened years ago, still affect me now. I think they may affect you as well, Jon, because you have been tied to me. My good-sister’s maiden name was Martell, and she was the younger sister of Oberyn Martell. They tell me that Dorne has forgiven the crown for the Sack, but I don’t believe it possible unless they are heartless. I mourn for a mother and brother I did not even know: They must mourn for their sister, who grew up with them. For their niece and nephew.

I am hoping that I am wrong, that Prince Oberyn’s presence does not have to do with Princess Elia, but I have learned in King’s Landing that few people act without a purpose. Talk to him, and tell me what was said.

Remain well,

Daenerys

*****

“Princess Elia was your sister,” Jon said, almost accusing. In his hand he held Daenerys letter, nearly shaking.

Oberyn turned to him from his spot in the armory, where Jon had found him idly sharpening his spear. He’d never seen Oberyn use his weapon of choice—he never spared with the recruits, and when he was teaching Jon, the Viper used a sword.

The four Brother’s that were with him looked up from the work, perplexed at the exchange. Oberyn ordered them out with a sharp word, and they obeyed, although with reluctance. Jon didn’t look at them as they shouldered past.

The young boy had grown fond of the prince in the four months they’d known one another. He’d began to turn to Oberyn more and more—for approval, for lessons, sometimes simply for companionship. He was the first person Jon felt completely comfortable around, because the Viper was so simultaneously frustrating yet honest, that Jon didn’t feel the need to guard his words in the man’s presence. He’d grown fond of Oberyn, and thought the man felt the same.

What a fool I am.

“She was your sister!” Jon said again, hoping for denial.

Oberyn placed his spear on his knees, slowly straitening his back and glanced at the letter in Jon’s hand. He nodded. “She was.”

Jon faltered, unprepared for the simple confirmation. His anger grew.

“Is that why you came to Winterfell? Is that why you told me about my mother? You wanted to manipulate me, to have me manipulate my father!” He was breathing rapidly, and his voice cracked at the end. Jon looked away.

“Yes,” the Viper said simply, still watching Jon, face blank.

Jon was shocked for a moment; he hadn’t expected such an honest reply. His mouth opened and closed it, unable to respond for many moments.

Slowly, his tense shoulders slumped. “You only took me as your squire because Daenerys is my betrothed. Of course. Why else would a Prince have a bastard squire for him. Did you even tell me
the truth, about Dorne, or were those just lies?” Jon shook his head, perplexed. “Why? My father—he won’t help you even if you keep me hostage. He’d never rebel against the King.”

*A king who smiled at the corpses of babes. A king my father calls friend. A king he occasionally speaks of, telling fond tales of the Eryie.*


He father was the most honorable man he knew. *Everyone* said so. But how can he be friend with a man who condoned the murder of children? How can he support such a King?

*Would he have dismissed killing Daenerys as well, had another man found her?*

Jon didn’t understand the world anymore.

“I took you as my squire because you have talent; you piqued my interest, brooding and all,” Oberyn said, and for once his voice was free of sly mockery, of hidden amusement. He sounded much older then. “Did my brother send me? Yes, but I am no puppet. I chose you as my squire, not the betrothed of a Targaryen. If I had no interest, I would have sailed to Dorne, dropped you at my brother’s feet, and departed.”

Jon couldn’t believe him, and Oberyn saw the doubt in his face.

The man stood slowly. “When the Lannisters—” there was pure hatred in his tone “—took King’s Landing…no, even before that. When Aryes ordered that my sister was to wed his son, I knew she was throwing away her desires. She did her duty, as was expected. She cared for her husband, although she never loved him: she could not desire a man in such a way. However, she was grateful for the children he helped create. Her beloved Aegon and Rhaenys—beautiful babes, always laughing. *My blood.*” Oberyn’s hands began to shake, and in one powerful movement, he threw the spear onto the stone floor, the clang of it resonating in the quiet. “Such joy filled her when she held them, such happiness. She did not care that they were royal, that they were a prince and princess, that she was the to be queen, and her son king. My sister loved her children, because they were her own. And I loved them for the same reason."

The Viper began to pace, his face growing stormier.

“My sister is not the tragic, abandoned woman these Kingdom’s make her out to be! She was a proud, passionate woman of Dorne, and she could not be shamed by the petty actions of Rhaegar Targaryen. Oh, we felt the affront, my brother and I, we felt the slight! But love is unpredictable, and Dorne understands passion. Who could have predicted one fool’s love would ignite such a flame? Rhaegar underestimate his own father’s madness—or perhaps he ignored it, to avoid taking action! *Shining* Rhaegar, a coward who fled from his responsibilities for some ridiculous prophecy!”

Jon couldn’t understand everything Oberyn said, but the hate on his face was plain to see. The young boy could only watch as the Viper prowled like some huge beast that had finally broken free of his chains. Jon had never seen any hint of all this rage masked behind the Prince’s casual words.

“An affair, perhaps another wife? That we could have forgiven—Elia would probably have been relieved! She could return to Dorne, leave the Stark girl to take care of the shit city. But her fool of a husband eloped with his young lover, and left my sister in the hands of his father! That, I will never forgive!”

Suddenly, Oberyn turned to Jon, and leaned over the boy, grasping his chin and staring fiercely into his eyes. “The Lannister’s murdered my nephew: they smashed his small body against the wall—as
Elia watched—and then raped her with his blood on their hands before killing her. My niece, they
stabbed hundreds of times in her own bed.” Jon began to shake, stomach roiling in horror, unable to
stop picturing the scene. “It took us years to learn the details, years of spying to learn every part of
the truth, expect the identities of their murders!

“So yes, Jon Snow, I came North to take you to Dorne, so that we could make use of you. I would
make use of anyone that could help me avenge my sister. But I have never lied, not in all these
months, nor have I pretended.”

Oberyn relapsed Jon’s chin, and moved passed the frozen boy. Jon’s ears resonated with everything
he’d learned.

“I depart in a fortnight,” Oberyn said, voice quieter. “You may choose to come with me, or you may
disappear one night and return to Winterfell.”

Jon turned, shocked. “You’re letting me choose? But I thought…”

Oberyn looked over his shoulder, and give his quicksilver smile, eyes somber. “You know
everything now. The truth changes nothing of my plans for you, nor should it change your goals.
The reasons you chose to be my squire. Dorne does not punish children for the acts of others, nor
take away their choices. We are not barbaric.”

Jon shook his head. “My father won’t rebel for me,” Jon said again, exhausted. “Even if I wanted
him to. If he didn’t turn against his King after—after what happened at the Sack, he won’t turn away
for a bastard. And even if you use me for revenge against him…”

*My father is an honorable man.* The thought felt like a prayer.

Oberyn paused, turning back fully around. “Do not misunderstand, boy. Eddard Stark did not
approve of Baratheon’s actions, nor of the Lannisters’. Dorne does not seek revenge against House
Stark.”

Jon jerked his face up, eyes huge. “What?”

Oberyn sighed. “Tell your betrothed to gather her information more carefully.” Jon reflexively
clutched the paper still in his hand. “Eddard Stark was the only one who dared speak against the
Sack, who demanded the Lannister’s be punished. He turned away from the King over those events.
To this day, they remain estranged, party due to the events of the Rebellion, and partly due to your
betrothal.”

Jon shook his head, hopeful but in denial. “But—but father always talks about the King, of their
childhoods…”

“One can miss a friend who is gone, Jon Snow. There is no shame in that. While I have much to say
about your father, most unflattering, the one fact that is not doubted is his honor. Whatever his faults,
Eddard Stark is a good man.”

Jon felt as if he’d been suffocating until that very moment, and then suddenly someone had pulled
him out of the water he’d finally been able to breathe.

*My father is an honorable man.* The words felt like the truth.

“Thank you,” Jon whispered, for what he couldn't say. Perhaps because Oberyn had reaffirmed the
one central truth of Jon’s life, the one fact never to be doubted.
I have to tell Daenerys. I have to tell her everything.

“A fortnight, Jon Snow. Decide.”

And then the Red Viper was gone.

*****

Daenerys lay on her bed, reading Jon’s response for the third time. All he’d learned, the horrible truth of it. Oberyn Martell’s words, which she could understand. The small girl couldn’t fault him for wanting to avenge his sister. She, who wanted revenge herself, but was powerless to get it.

But my father tried to stop it, I swear. He tried to get the King to punish those responsible, but he could not. To this day, they are estranged. I am relived, Daenerys, you do not understand how much. My father’s honor was the only thing I’ve ever been sure of, and today I almost lost faith in him. I understand now, just a little bit, of what you went through when you learned the full truth. Knowledge is a terrible thing, but I would not choose a lie over a truth. That’s how the world becomes distorted, that’s how delusions begin. I admire your strength, Daenerys Stormborn, for being able to face the truth and not let it crush you.

I know you will be strong enough to face the King in the same way, if not for yourself, then for the people who care about you.

But how could she stop herself when they returned to King’s Landing? How could she halt her tongue? She felt such rage inside her, burning, burning!

She sat up abruptly. “If someone you loved was hurt, would you do everything you could to avenge them?” she asked, turning to Tyene, who was sitting by the fireplace, stitched.

The older girl’s gaze was fathomless. Sometimes, Tyene seemed like a similar yet different person, but Dany rather liked those glimpses. It felt like Tyene stopped holding herself back then.

“Yes,” her blonde friend said, quiet but clear. “Everything. Anything.”

Daenerys carefully opened her bedside drawer and deposited his letter with all the other ones. “What if you had no power to do so? What if you were helpless?”

Tyene smiled, looking back down to her stitching. “Then you simply get power. Alliances, fear, respect. You have begun to gather it already.”

Daenerys was startled, “What?”

“You inspire, m’lady. You change people, because you believe in them, and they in tern believe in your dreams. That loyalty is the greatest power you’ll ever have, and few have it.”

Daenerys shook her head. “I don’t understand. I’m not doing anything.”

Tyene laughed gently, and put down her work. The maid rose and came to stand before the younger girl, who sat with her knees against her chest. Tyene leaned down, brushed Dany’s hair from her face, and kissed her sweetly on the forehead. “Exactly. You see people, and demand that they see you. That is power. Other types of power will come when you’re older.”

Daenerys hesitated, “What if the person I want revenge against…what if they are very powerful, and not everyone would approve?”
“Only the gods are untouchable, sweetling. Valar morghulis.”

All men must die...

“First,” Tyene continued, “You ask yourself if they truly deserve to be punished. Anger is not always justified—at times, we must have restraint. Next, you must seek ways to ensure no innocent is caught in the war, because they do not deserve to suffer for another’s acts. Finally, before you act, be aware that there is always a consequence. There are no simple choices in the game.”

Why does everyone keep talking about some game?

“But what if I want revenge now? How can I stop myself?” She shook her head, frustrated. Tears were gathering in her eyes, the pain of her entire family, and all they’d gone through.

Tyene smiled and sat beside her, gathering the small girl close. “You stop yourself because you know that you won’t succeed. And then you ask yourself: which is more gratifying? An impulsive move now, doomed to failure, or patience and planning that will be rewarded.”

“I’m not good at being patient,” Daenerys admitted, signing. But she understood the point.

Tyene stroked her hair. “That’s all right. You have many years to learn.”

*****

Jaime Lannister had noticed how Daenerys had kept her distance in the past week, and he’d gathered that she’d finally learned about the Sack.

Well, Jaime didn’t care for her regard any way. It was better like this, because at least now his world made sense again. He could go back to his comfortable habits, without needed to be disrupted by some idealistic dragon.

Idealism always died in the face of reality. A young boy who dream of glory, who dreams of becoming the perfect Knight, understand that perfectly.

Already, Dragonstone was becoming busier and in a fortnight, he could watch the presentation Baratheon had planned, and finally return to Cersei. He felt her absence like a missing limb, and cursed his own impulse, for the hundredth time, that led him to come on this ridiculous trip.

These were the thoughts of the stubborn, hurt young lion as paced his chamber, restless.

Why did I have to mention Elia? Why can I never think before—

A knock on the door interrupted his musings, and with a sigh, he went to get it, expecting some servant, or perhaps someone who owed his father a debt and was hoping to come and repay it to Jaime rather than have to deal with Tywin.

He really should have expected it to be Daenerys. The knock had been a bit too imperious to be anyone else. She strode into his room, Ser Justin behind her.

“Won’t you come in?” he muttered, sardonic.

She flipped around to face him, resolute. “Did you have anything to do with the murder of my good-sister, niece, and nephew? Did you know it would happen and not stop it?”

How was it possible this little girl could keep shocking him? For a moment, he was enraged. How dare she accuse me—!
And then Jaime saw the tears in her eyes as she looked at him, the shaking in her body.

All his anger deflated as quickly as it had come.

“Rhaegar told me to protect them. I failed. That is the extent of my role. I knew nothing…I would have stopped it.”

She deflated slowly, eyes scanning his own. Seven hells, but he surrendered already. He just liked this child too much to play any games. Besides, that was the forte of his father, brother, and sister. Jaime, beyond all his pride, was a rather straightforward man.

She raised her chin. “I like you, Jaime Lannister. Your vanity, your arrogance, your annoying sneers. Despite all you’ve done, despite all your family has done. I will judge you on who you are. This I swear.”

Yes…it’s much too late.
River's Past

Chapter Summary

A target, a truth, a gift, and a story.

Chapter Notes

Wow, this is my longest chapter ever! Don't get used to it, lol. There were just so many important scenes here, and I decided to put it all in rather than split it in two. Happy Monday, I guess (although it's still counting this as 'tomorrow') :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tyene Sand believed that torture was a necessary instrument. She also believed some people deserved it, although brute force was a disgusting method. Not only was poison a more elegant tool, but there were certain elixirs that could induce terrible pain, but without the risk of death. Her father had taught her how inconvenient it was when information died with a prisoner. At times, she even enjoyed it when terrible men and women begged her. Therefore, when Tyene chose Clayton Suggs as her target, she was not hypocritical enough to say it was because he enjoyed his craft.

Cruelty, too, had a place in the world. Many good things could only be accomplished by cruel men. But there was a place, and a purpose, behind every act. She chose Suggs because he didn’t keep his cruelty confined to the dungeons, where it belonged.

And that made him expendable.

*****

Maester Cressen sat across from Daenerys in Dragonstone’s library, his chain gleaming at his throat. The large windows let in the midday sun, and Dany basked in the gentle warmth. Dressed in purple satin, hair in golden ribbons, she sat in her favorite seat, between a large window and the massive hearth. Ser Justin sat nearby, leafing through some dusty tomb in boredom. Every once in a while, the pale-haired, blue-eyed Knight would sneeze, sniffle, and cough—always in that order. Daenerys found it rather fascinating.

He’d been teaching Daenerys the histories of the Northern Houses, and about the Kings of Winter, Jon’s ancestors. Torrhen Stark was the most famous, known as the ‘King Who Knelt,’ because he’d submitted to Aegon rather than fight. Personally, Daenerys thought he’d made the right choice; he’d chosen his people over his own pride, and it was unfair that he was still mocked in history.

“‘The current Lord is Eddard Stark, who succeeded his father and elder brother after both perished during the Rebellion.” He sounded uncomfortable, and tried to gloss over the information, but she shook her head.

“I know my father killed them,” she said, softly. “I know how.”
He signed sadly and shook his head. “My dear, you are too young to know these things.”

Dany raised her chin. “Why bother writing history down, if not to remember it?”

He chuckled quietly. “Ah, my little scholar. I did not say that you must never learn, but that you are too young. A girl of nine should not be so weighted. You should be laughing and playing with friends, your greatest concern should be some small childhood drama,” he said, wistful. His eyes teared up, just a bit.

Daenerys stood quickly and went around the table, sitting carefully beside him. She rested her head against his arm, carefully aware of his frail body. The old man patted her head gently.

“Tell me about the Wall?” she said softly, smiling up at him. “Jon’s there right now, or maybe he’s left already, I’m not sure, but he told me it’s amazing. Is it really tall enough to touch the clouds?”

Cressen smiled at her, “Back to your seat, and I’ll tell you.”

Dany complied quickly, leaning over the table and watching him. Even Ser Justin seemed interested in this story.

“Our story begins with the Legend of the Long Night. More than eight thousand years ago—although some insist it was six thousand—in the Age of Heroes, a terrible darkness covered the land, and the sun hid from the world for a generation. From this darkness, in a place called the Land of Always Winter, which was said to exist at the tip of the world, far north of the Wall, a great evil arose. They were called the Others: monsters made of ice, who could raise the dead to serve them. A massive army of dead men arose, with the single goal of enslaving all those who still breathed.”

“Why?” she asked.

He blinked, surprised. “Why? Well, they were wicked, my dear.”

She frowned. “But surely they had a reason. It seems rather pointless to just want to get rid of everyone. What would they do then?”

Cressen shrugged. “It’s a story, my dear. Or perhaps the truth was lost to time. Maybe they had reason to hate the living, or maybe they were simply created that way. As you were created to be insatiably curious, with a penchant for interrupting poor Maesters” he bemoaned good-naturedly. Ser Justin guffawed.

She glared at her knight, not amused. Then Dany smiled, a bit sheepish, at Maester Cressen.

“Now, amongst this evil, the First Men and the Children of the Forest, a race of magical beings who were here before man stepped foot in Westeros—”

“What happened to the Children?” she asked, unable to help herself. “Are they still here?”

He sighed with exaggerated exasperation. “If they ever existed, then they are long gone. In the North, they say their Gods live in their weirwood trees, and that the Children were the one to carve faces onto the white wood, so they could spy on man. But here in the south, all their trees, and the Old Gods, are gone. The Children left with them.”

She found that rather sad. The First Men had taken their home. It wasn’t fair.

“Now, as I was saying: the original members of the Night’s Watch banded together and drove the Others back to the far north. Some legends say a single hero born of fire defeated them, but that tale
is bathed in even more mystery than this one, and originates in Essos. After the victory, called the Battle for the Dawn, Brandon the Builder, the legendary founder of House Stark, banded together with the Children and giants to build the Wall. It’s said that he imbued the Ice with magic, to keep out the Others. In truth, this is all probably just a story, and the Wall was built to Keep out Wildlings, as it does today.”

“But Dragon’s were real,” she insisted. “Even though they’re gone now. Why not the Others, and the Children, and giants? Why build a massive Wall just to keep out people?”

“Dragons were animals, my dear. Impressive, terrifying—but still simply creatures. The Others are magic given form. A children’s tale.”

She frowned but didn’t respond. It seemed silly to her that anyone would build such a huge thing just for some people. After all, before Aegon I had united Westeros, there were constant wars between the kingdoms, and no one ever thought to build giant walls between them.

“The Wall is seven hundred feet tall, generally, but some hilled regions raised even nine hundred feet high. Yes,” he chuckled, seeing her awed look. “It does, in fact, reach the clouds. It’s said to be one of the wonders of the world.”

“I want to see it,” she breathed.

He smiled, a bit sad. “Perhaps one day, my dear.”

*If I’m allowed to.* The words were unspoken, but she heard them.

“The Night’s Watch has manned it since it’s conception, however the Brotherhood has slowly fallen into disrepair and disrepute. Now only criminals are sent there, and only three of the nineteen castles still function. Much of the lands below it are now barren, because of frequent Wildling attack.”

She frowned, suddenly worried for Jon. What if he faced…but no, he was with the other Brothers, and he hadn’t said there were any problems at the Wall. Besides, Prince Oberyn was known as one of the best fighters in the world. Jon was surely safe with him.

“Now,” Maester Cress regained her attention, flipping reaching for another massive tomb from the pile beside him. “Back to our geography lessons, my dear. Let’s see, yesterday we left off at the Slave Cities, did we not? Rather fitting.”

“Fitting?” she inquired, perplexed.

“Lord Stark recently found out that one of his bannermen was selling lawbreakers as slaves,” master Cressen shook his head, frowning severely in disapproval. “The shame of it. The lord, Mormont, fled to Essos when Lord Stark called for his head.”

Dany’s mouth dropped open, appalled. “He was selling people? But I thought the North hated slavery even more than the south does.”

“A barbaric practise,” Cressen muttered. “The Northmen do despise it, which is why this was a shocking development.”

“Seems like Lord Stark’s having trouble controlling his men,” Ser Justin noted.

Cressen waved that away. “Some men are just rotten, young Ser. Now, where were we?”

“Astapor,” she informed his, helpfully. “But I don’t want to learn about geography. Tell me, why
does Essos even have slaves?” she wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Westeros doesn’t, and we’re fine.”

Cressen sighed. “That is a long, complicated story, my dear. Slavery can be summed down to free labor. Also, some Essosi cultures worship pagan gods that allow slavery, which simply compounds the tendency. The so-called masters relax, while their slaves do everything for them. Cook, clean, build, educate their children. In Astapor, they even train slave soldiers. Slavery is an integral part of their culture, and has been for many years.”

Daenerys contemplated this, tilting her head. “Some cultures are wrong,” she declared, resolute. “They should be changed.”

“Ah, my dear, a commendable idea. But there have been slaves in Essos for as long as living memory. Even the ancient Valyrian Freehold was built upon the backs of slaves. In fact, Braavos was founded by those who escaped the Valyrians.”

Daenerys shook her head. “Those are just excuses. If someone has power, then they can change things. My ancestors united Westeros and stopped the endless wars. Someone else should stop the slave trade!”

“Aegon and his sisters had dragons, my dear. Today, all we have are swords. The world may bow to a dragon, but they will fight against a sword.”

She slumped. Why was the world so complicated? Why couldn’t people simply be nicer to each other? Why couldn’t people just choose their own fate…?

*But I can’t either.*

“I understand,” she said, quietly. “I can’t choose my own fate, either. I suppose that’s a little like being a slave.”

Cressen jerked his head from his book, mouth dropped open in shock. “What?”

“Well,” she challenged, defiant. “I can’t do anything I want to, not really. Even the man I’m to marry was chosen for me. I can learn about these places and cultures, but I know the king will never let me be free. Not as long as I’m a Targaryen. Even my children will be threatened, just for their blood. We will never be free.”

*I want you to take my name, Jon. But will the world allow me to give it to you? This world, that took everyone in my family—that allowed horrible things to happen to them. How can I challenge it?*

Cressen looked poleaxed. “My dear, it’s not the same thing! Why-why-why slavery is vastly different from your circumstances!”

“I have a better life than they do, I know that, but it’s still the same!” she insisted. It felt freeing to finally voice these thoughts. “My whole life is planned for me.”

“You get an education, a family, your own keep!”

“You said slaves did everything in Essos. Some are educated, I’m sure some are even treated nicely by their masters, or cared for by the highborn children. Some may even have certain freedoms, but it’s not like they can ever decide to leave!”

Both men stared at her, astonished. Daenerys felt faintly ridiculous. She had a life most slaves could only dream of, and she was eternally grateful for everything, and everyone, around her, but it didn’t change the fact that nothing had ever been her choice, or ever would be.
“A castle, children, husband: what if I don’t want any of it?” she asked, stubborn now. She did actually want those things—but it was the principle of the matter. People were different, surely not all girls wanted what she did.

“But—but you say you like your betrothed?” Cressen looked completely out of his depth, grasping at any straws to end this uncomfortable conversation.

Dany slumped for a moment, feeling guilty. Then she shook her head. “I do. I like him. But what if I didn’t? What if he was horrible? What if he were Joffrey?” Just the thought filled her with dread. “I’d still have to marry him! At least men can run off to the Night’s Watch, or to Essos, or to the Citadel if they’re unhappy. They can get jobs, build their own lives. What if I wanted to be a Maester?”

Tyene had to sneak into the castle and steal so she wouldn’t starve. Were where her choices?

“My dear,” Cressen said, gently. “All young women must marry whom their parents choose. Things like the Citadel or the Watch…those are not a woman’s place.”

‘Not a woman’s place’. What a strange idea. Who decides what someone’s ‘place’ should be?

She narrowed her eyes, “So one day, long ago, someone decided what girls could and couldn’t do…just like some other person decided that slavery is acceptable?” She rolled her eyes. ‘Just because it’s happened till now, doesn’t make it right.’

Cressen was speechless, mouth open. He finally swallowed, but couldn’t respond.

“I was wrong. Westeros isn’t better than Essos—our slavery is just different. All girls have no choices, not just me.” Daenerys nodded, “Our culture should change, too.”

*****

During his time at the Wall, Jon Snow learned one central lesson: people would do anything to survive. Even swear their lives away to a cause most didn’t believe in. Oh, he knew that the Watch was necessary, that wildlings were the reason this part of the North was so barren, but it didn’t change the fact that most of the men here chose this life under duress.

Would I have chosen it, in another life?

Jon was glad he had choices. He was glad he could decide his fate, even if it was greatly restricted. Compared to many of the men at the Wall, Jon’s life had been easy. He would appreciate this lesson. But now it was time to leave.

He walked behind Oberyn towards the Rookery, for one last discussion with Maester Aemon. The old, kind man was one of the only things he’d miss about this place. Aemon felt…like a long-lost grandfather; a person he could go to with his troubles, for understanding or advice. Jon would miss him.

“I will miss the old man,” Oberyn said, in a rare, serious mood. “He is not a fool, and that is rare in Westeros. Even more so in the North.”

Jon released an exasperated sigh. He’d long since learned that most of Oberyn slights were intended to annoy, rather than express his opinion.

“He taught me much about the world,” Jon said in response.
The relationship between Prince and squire had been strained for a few days after the revelations. But in the end, Jon knew that he would still follow the man. Not only was Oberyn correct in noting that the past didn’t change Jon’s real reasons for going with Oberyn, but at least now that Jon knew Dorne had some plot in mind, he could prepare for it. Jon would simply watch and learn, and when the time came, he would make his own choices. Furthermore, the young boy had developed a certain loyalty towards the mocking Dornishman—and whatever his faults, it was true that Oberyn had never lied, as far as Jon knew.

I’d prefer a man who told the truth when asked, to a man who fed me lies to ‘protect me’ from the world. It was why he’d told Daenerys everything, rather than hide it. Although part of him wanted to spare her the news, he’d promised honesty between them. Besides, this was information they both deserved to know. Jon couldn’t hate Oberyn for his motivation—not when the idea of someone hurting Sansa or Arya, in the same way, made Jon’s blood boil.

They arrived at the Maester’s door, and upon knocking, were instantly led into the sitting room: the Maester had been expecting them. On the floor beside the Maester’s chair, Jon noted a long, thin metal chest. He blinked at the new addition. He’d been in this room dozens of times in the two months since the Maester had decided to teach him, and never seen the chest before.

“Have you ever wondered, young Prince, what would have happened had you made a small, different decision? How your life would have been different?”

Oberyn sat in the chair across from Aemon, and Jon stood beside him, between the men.

“Everyday I picture storming King’s Landing and taking my sister and her children back to Dorne. The King’s will be damned,” Oberyn responded candidly.

The Maester smiled, sadly, eyes wet. “My greatest regret was indulging a young man’s beliefs. Upon my words, he acted thoughtlessly, and his actions led to war. I was confronted with the death of my House, the exile of my nephew, and the knowledge that my niece’s fate rests in the hands of strangers. The gods chose to test my vows so late in life, and I nearly succumbed. Yet if I had, I would not have been here when a young boy came to the Wall with his Knight. My reward for keeping to my vows: proof that the gods exist.”

They stared at him, nonplused.

“A Maester at the Night’s Watch. Aemon…” Oberyn’s eyes widened, and he cursed softly. “Here I am, another fool in the North.”

“Who are you?” Jon asked, a horrible suspicion in his gut. Surely he couldn’t be…

“My name was Aemon Targaryen,” the Maester whispered. “I was the son of a king, the brother of a king. I lived through the lives and deaths of four generations. Once, I feared death, now I fear outliving the last of my blood.”

Jon exhaled slowly, shocked. “You’re Daenerys’s uncle.” He quickly stumbled over his words, correcting, “I-I mean princess Daenerys.”

_Gods, he’s had to deal with the knowledge of a bastard marrying his niece! No wonder he asked for me._ Jon felt a bit depressed—it seemed all anyone was ever interested in was his connection to Daenerys. How different his life would have been if he hadn’t been betrothed. Likely no one would have ever given him a second glance—probably just another faceless Brother of the Night’s Watch.

Aemon reached out and carefully found Jon’s hand, patting it gently. “I have gathered that you are
fond of her, which is all an uncle could ask. And I have grown rather fond of you as well, my boy. Put your mind at ease: As I said upon our first meeting, a name is something given to a boy, but the man you’ll be will choose his own path.”

“‘When the sun comes to the Wall’,” Oberyn muttered. “What did you mean by those words?”

Aemon reclined back in his chair, smiling forlornly. “When I first sailed north, I was accompanied by a beloved companion—a dear friend, although at the time he hated me and my brother. He ascended to Lord Commander of the Watch; I had little doubt that he would.”

“Lord Brynden Rivers,” Jon whispered, excitement in his tone. Lord Bloodraven. The man before me actually knew Lord Bloodraven!

Aemon chuckled. “Ah, Bloodraven would scorn your regard, my boy—and then spend hours telling you stories of his life. When he lost his eye, he refused to wear a patch, yet grew his hair to cover his wound. Such a contradictory man he was.” Aemon signed in fondness, but it was tinged with melancholy.

“He was a good man, although misunderstood from the moment of his birth. He was marked for death—or by death—some whispered, when they gazed upon his white hair and red eyes. A dark sorcerer, a kinslayer, the Stranger’s own messenger—their titles for him never ceased, and were rarely pleasant. But whatever the truth was, Bloodraven kept it close to himself.”

Aemon paused, eyes unfocused in memory, a small smile upon his lips. They didn’t interrupt him. Jon got the feeling that it may have been countless years since the Maester had indulged these memories. What a lonely existence the man must live.

“Many years after he became Lord Commander, he disappeared beyond the Wall.” Aemon continued suddenly. “We searched for months, but no trace was ever found. Just another of my blood taken from me—another in the line of many. But then, nine years ago, a Brother came back beyond the Wall, and they tell me he was pale as snow, and carrying only this chest.”

They both look down at the metal, and Jon began to form a suspicion. Oberyn was eying it knowingly.

“Aeetes, was the Brother’s name. He left this before me, along with a letter, and said the Ravens had led him to it—that the tree roots opened when he found it, and allowed him to take it away. They all thought he was mad. The next day, he deserted, and was beheaded by your father.”

Jon sucked in a startled breath.

“‘When the sun comes to the wall, She will return home’” said the letter, signed with Bloodraven’s lost sigil. Open it, Jon. She’s yours now—to protect the last of his blood.”

Hands shaking, Jon looked to Oberyn, almost for reassurance. If what was in that chest... Jon didn’t know how he could handle such a responsibility.

“Open it, Jon,” Oberyn encouraged with a razor smile. It was perhaps the first time he’d called his squire simply by his name. Neither man thought that Jon was beneath the prize within—and the small boy almost wept.

Jon crouched down and unclasped the lid, his heart pounding in his hear. With a breath, he opened the chest, nearly fumbling in his nervousness.

Inside lay the most beautiful sword he had ever seen. Its blade shone—almost as if it was lit from
within—and the metal was decorated with intricate designs. *Valyrian Steel*! Its hilt was slender and wrapped in black leather, with wild, golden flames carved into the pommel. The crossguard was also carved in the form of flames, two single ones undulating in the firelight, with a bright red ruby set directly in the middle completed the sword. It was magnificent.

“Dark Sister, wielded by Queen Visenya during the Conquest, by Prince Daemon during the the Dance of Dragons, by Aemon the Dragonknight during the Conquest of Dorne, and by Brynden River’s During the Blackfire Rebellions. And now, upon your marriage, she will once again return to House Targaryen: to protect and wage war. Just as the Gods intended.”

Jon reached down, almost in a trance, and lifted the sword from the case, almost surprised by it’s heaviness. The metal was warm, and as Jon wrapped his hand around the hilt and raised the sword high, watching it reflect the firelight, he felt as if it **belonged** with him.

“Treat her well, Jon Snow, and beware: Dark Sister has a taste for blood.”

*****

It had been six months since Catelyn Tully was sent back to Riverrun. Now she sat at her childhood window, clutching Bran to her chest as he slept, staring out at the river below. For many months now, all she did was stay in one place, with nothing but her thoughts to occupy her. Many long-forgotten memories played constantly in her mind, and without the responsibility of being the Lady of Winterfell, she now had endless time to just think.

The scenery around her was both nostalgic and alien. She’d forgotten, for a while, what it was like to be a Tully. *Family, Duty, Honor.*

She’d tried so hard to live up to those ideals. She’d tried so hard to be the perfect lady, the perfect wife, the perfect mother. She loved her husband and children so fiercely, she would do anything for them, and where had it all gotten her?

*Shamed* before all the realm, separated from her eldest son and daughter—all because of a bastard! Just as she’d always known, Jon Snow was already destroying her family. She had to return home—she had to be there to protect Ned and her children! The Lord of Winterfell was too trusting, and though she loved that most about him, it meant that Catelyn must be the one to make the hard choices for their family.

*Why couldn’t he see it?*

Jon had always been a strange, somber child. He watched everything with a covetous eye, and had an arrogance about him that only she could see. Boys like that grew into men who **desired** things—power, glory, lust. She’d refused to let such ambitions foster, and had been banished for it.

Jon Snow was a threat, and Catelyn needed to protect her family.

She would show them, all who doubted her, that she was right. She wouldn’t put her children and grandchildren at risk and coddle a bastard, who hated her and hated her children. A bastard who looked too Northern, too Stark.

*More than my own children!*

A bastard that had driven her from her home.

“*Sent away like some common whore!*” Hoster Tully roared, his old, weathered face twisted in rage. Catelyn had flinched at the words, shaking. *Her childhood had taught her to never anger her
father, and yet here she was, a woman grown, with a husband and four children—her duty fulfilled—and back to where she’d started. The bastard’s fault!

She stood in his study, alone with him and Edmure, humiliated.

“Father, I—"

“Silence! You have humiliated our House before all the realm! You’ve been found lacking compared to a bastard, just as you were lacking compared to his mother!”

She flinched and hunched down. She was suddenly a little girl again. Perhaps she’d never stopped being one.

No—I am a woman grown, now!

“Father, it wasn’t my fault! Some of the servants abused him, and they blamed me! I didn’t order it, but Ned wouldn’t believe me.”

But she had rewarded them…but was it her fault they were simply exceptional servants?

“Implicated by servants!” Hoster slammed his fist against the solid wood of the table. Both she and Edmure flinched. “So you had no control over your own household! You were raised to be a lady—and you’ve failed at everything!”

“Father!” she gasped, feeling the words like a stab to the chest.

“Get out—you’re back in your old room. Gods know you shouldn’t be.”

She’d disappointed her father—humiliated her House. Her own husband chose a bastard over her—and everyone knew it. She saw the glances of the servants, the quickly hushed conversations when she stepped into a room.

She, Catelyn, the Lady of Winterfell, was now a jest amongst the servants.

All because of a bastard.

The first months back had been horrible—she'd written Ned countless letters, begging him to take her back, but all she ever got was a simple missive of refusal. Her own husband had abandoned her. Robb refused to write back, and Sansa was still too young—and now in the hands of some northern woman, taking her daughter away from the Faith.

Her father still refused to speak to her, Uncle Brynden was at the Eyrie, and Edmure always stumbled over his words, too awkward to even try to comfort his sister.

Yet he is father’s heir.

Before her Edmure’s birth, Catelyn had been Hoster’s heir. He would spend time with her, educate her about the realm, about politics, about the running of a Keep. She’d soaked in the information, proud any time her father would praise her. Before long, she’d begun to envision her life in his place—she would be Lady of Riverrun, and her beautiful, happy home would be her responsibility.

And then Edmure was born, and Hoster began to spend less time with his eldest daughter. He became too busy for her, and her mother too sick. Only Uncle Brynden was there to listen to her cries, to wipe her tears. Only he was patient with her. Soon, her father began to talk of betrothal, although she was only eight. He would speak of powerful Lords—some as old as he—and their
And that when Catelyn understood that she was no longer his heir, and soon she would lose her beloved Riverrun forever.

“That’s all right,” the small girl whispered, in Riverrun’s rainbow Sept. “I have faith in the Mother, to find me a home. I have faith in the Maiden, to bring me love.”

Soon after that, her mother had also left her alone, and Catelyn no longer had two parents. She no longer had a mother.

“Your mother has passed,” Hoster informed nine-year-old Catelyn, seven-year-old Lyssa, and Petyr Baelish. Catelyn felt her world crumble. She wanted to retreat to her room with Lysa and cry. But she had no time for mourning. Hoster put his hand upon Catelyn’s shoulder, squeezing tightly. “You are now the Lady of Riverrun in her stead, Catelyn. I know you will make me proud.”

She’d bit her tongue upon her instinctual denial, and nodded soberly. “Yes, father.”

*Her father loved her best. More than Lysa, more than baby Edmure. She would make him proud.*

That night, while Lysa cried in her arms, Catelyn held herself strong. She was the Lady of Riverrun now—and a lady always conducted herself with pride.

For years, she’d been the perfect daughter, the perfect lady—as she’d been taught, as was expected. While Lysa and Petyr played, she’d overseen the servants, while they’d laughed, she’d read and taken dictations for her father. She made him proud, and that was all she could ask for.

*I am a lady.*

*I am a lady.*

*I am a lady!*

And then had come the betrothal. At age twelve, her father had informed her that she was to wed Brandon Stark, and would one day be Lady of Winterfell.

“The North?” she’d gasped. But it was so—so cold, a far, and they didn’t even worship the proper Gods! How could she be happy there?

*Hoster frowned, disapproval in his eyes. “Are you not pleased? You’ll be wife to a Lord Paramount—and your marriage will strengthen our House. More than any lady should wish for.”*

She swallowed. I am a Lady…and then smiled, “Of course I’m happy, father! It’s a splendid match. Thank you.” Catelyn gave a deep curtesy, using the moment she glanced down to take a deep, fortifying breath.

*It was a spending match. She would be Lady of Winterfell, wife to the Warden of the North. A splendid match indeed. Her father truly loved her, to arrange such a coup! The Mother and Maiden would do the rest. Catelyn would be the perfect lady, and her husband would surely love her above all others.*

“You’re the perfect daughter, my Catelyn. You make me proud.”

*Her chest exploding with joy, she walked forward to hug her father, overjoyed. “Thank you, father.” Yes, everything would be fine. She would be happy.*
But in the end, all she’d gotten was a cold, dreary castle in the North, her true love murdered, and married to his younger brother. A man known for his honor, who’d only once broken his oath—a man who’d betrayed her while their son was in her womb. A man who’d humiliated her before the realm.

“She must have a really frigid cunt, to drive honorable Ned into another woman’s arms!” a guard at Winterfell guffaw, late at night while she’d returned from the nursery. Catelyn froze, ice filling her veins.

“You know what they say about those Riverland girls. Cold as Northern ice, and about as good a lay! Shame, she’s tolerable, for a southerner. Nowhere near the Lady Ashara in beauty, but tolerable. Still, you can’t enjoy a cold whore,” his companion muttered. Catelyn, a young bride of nineteen, blushed a deep, humiliated red. Tears of rage and pain gathered in her eyes. She quickly turned away, unable to bare anymore.

The last thing she heard was: “Aye, a damned shame. If Lord Stark had wed a proper Northern bride, he wouldn’t have strayed. Then his heir could look like a Stark, rather than just his bastard.”

Catelyn had cried herself to sleep that night, unable to stop hearing the words—with no one there to comfort her. She’d tried to hate Ned then, and for a while, she’d succeeded. But eventually, she’d begun to care for the stoic, serious man. Soon, she had fallen in love with his goodness; fallen in love with how he looked at their children. But she’d been unable to let go of her anger towards Jon’s mother, of her paranoia that the woman would appear one day and steal her husband.

Ned refused to speak of her, was cold and dismissive whenever she asked. And the one time she’d mentioned Ashara Dayne, he’d truly frightened her. Catelyn knew her husband didn’t love her as she loved him, and for that, she hated.

Jon snow was simply the easiest scapegoat. I cannot hate my husband, after all. He is a good man, and I am a lady!

Catelyn had been raised on horrifying tales of a bastard’s greed. Of trueborn children murdered, so a bastard could inherit. Of rebellions that had broken the realm! Countless nights, she’d woken in her hot room at Winterfell from nightmares of her children’s heads on a pike at the wall, of her and Ned beside them, while Jon Snow—Jon Stark—sat at Winterfell’s great hall. She’d imagined armies coming to their gates, of her daughters raped, of her son’s brutally burdened, all for Jon Snow’s ambition!

She couldn’t allow him to destroy her family! How dare he, betrothed to a royal, lord of his own keep, and yet still so covetous when he looked at Winterfell! How dare he threaten her children!

“They’re evil, the lot of them. Cursed by the Stranger.” Septa Mordane told a young Catelyn Stark, one more rant amongst hundreds. “They’re bred with greed in their bones, cursed by the gods for not being trueborn! Beware the bastard, Catelyn Tully. He will grow up playing with your children, eating your bread, smiling at you, mayhap even get you to care for him. But as soon as he’s a man grown he’ll turn his desire upon your home, and will let nothing stop him!”

Catelyn would often go to sleep with nightmares of men taking Riverrun away. She knew the words were true. Her father had no bastards, he was much too loyal to his wife. He knew it was a sin, and the gods always punished the sinful!

“Mama, it hurts, it hurts!” Bran whimpered, and began to cry. Catelyn jerked from her reverie, glancing down to see that she’d been squeezing him tightly to her chest. Horrified, she immediately relaxed her hold, and feathered his beautiful face with kisses. Just turned three, her precious child
was turning into the energetic, happy boy she’d grown to love. He took to Riverrun like a fish to water, loving the temperature, the Knights, and castle. It warmed her heart to see him happy, even if he didn’t understand why they were there.

Her precious son, who she’d protect at all costs.

“I’m so sorry, my baby. Mama was lost in thoughts. Did you have good dreams?” she cooed at him, kissing his tears away.

Bran sniffled, and nodded, hugging her neck close. Her sweetest child, her secret favorite.

The door banged open, and five-year-old Arya came running in, black hair in disarray, her pink dress stained with mud, but rather than her normal scowls or pouts, her most troubling child had a huge smile on her face. Catelyn’s heart melted. Maybe she was finally growing used to Riverrun, finally happy here.

“Mama! Rob and Sansa are here! They’re here, mama! Does this mean we’re going home? Please, please!”

Catelyn surged to her feet, heart pounding madly. Ned was here? Had he come to take her back? Thank the gods, he’s forgiven her! She touched her hair, concerned about how she looked, and looked down at her deep green dress, deeming it fitting to welcome her Lord Husband.

Bran squirmed from her arms and ran to Arya, equally excited to see his siblings, and Catelyn followed after them, nearly running in excitement. I can go home! I won’t be a useless burden anymore! Thank the gods for their mercy!

When she reached the grand hall, her father was greeting Robb and Sansa heartily, and he turned to her with a huge smile. He’d forgiven her as well!

“Ah Catelyn, there you are. What fine children you have, my dear. Such a strong son, such a beautiful daughter.” Robb puffed his chest up, and Sansa blushed, smiling. Catelyn felt her heart squeeze with pride.

Bran and Arya ran at their siblings, and all four laughed happily as they embraced. “You two have gotten so big!” Robb grinned, hugging Arya tightly, while Sansa held Bran. Catelyn was momentarily jarred by the Northern accent—it had been so long since she’d heard it! Then her lips stretched into a smile.

She stepped forward, Sansa came to her at once, a beauty with deep auburn hair, tied back in the northern style. Instead of the curtsey Catelyn expected, the girl ran to her and tacked her, holding tight. Momentarily shocked, Catelyn immediately overcame her surprise and hugged her daughter tightly.

She pulled away, stroking Sansa bright red hair, smiling softly at her daughter. “You’re so beautiful. You’ve gotten taller as well, my sweet.”

Sansa blushed, smiling widely—more widely than was proper, for a southern lady—and said, “I’ve missed you so much, mother.”

Catelyn felt tears gather in her eyes, and leaned down to kiss her baby’s forehead. “You could not have miss me as much as I missed you, Sansa.” She lay her forehead against her daughter’s, and closed her eyes for a long moment. Finally, she felt the hole in her heart mending. Her children were together again, safe.
She opened her eyes when she heard Robb step closer. He was still holding onto Arya, who clung to him tightly. He carefully set her down, detaching her with some difficulty, and then stepped closer to Catelyn.

Her eldest son looked at her with longing, but there was also still some anger shimmering in his gaze. Her chest constricted in pain. He hadn’t forgiven her—the bastard had probably filled his head with exaggerated tales to turn her eldest against her. Without her there, the stories had festered, and now who knows what he thought.

“Robb…Robb, please. I am sorry for it all.” His gaze softened, just a bit, and she stepped closer to him, placing her palm carefully on his cheek, and smiled tentatively. She would undo all the harm the bastard had caused, she would mend the rift between them and make him see the truth. “My son, how you’ve grown. You’re nearly a man, now. I’m so proud of you. When we return to Winterfell, I will make it all right.”

“Mother,” he breathed, relaxing fully. “It’s good to see you well.”

He smiled, equally tentative, and she leaned down to kiss his forehead, for just a bare moment. He was a man, and they were in public: it wouldn’t do for others to see him being coddled by his mother.

“Where is your Lord Father, Robb. I must speak to him.” She urged, glancing around. Perhaps he was still stabling the horses? He would never allow Robb and Sansa to venture south all alone!

But as soon as she saw Sansa look to the ground, a sad look on her face, and the guilty in Robb’s eyes, Catelyn knew. She swallowed hard.

“He’s not here, is here. How could he have let you come alone? The roads are dangerous!”

Anything could have happened to them! What had Ned been thinking?

Robb shook his head, pity in his eyes, and discomfort. “Father brought us here, and then continued back east. He’s heading to Dragonstone for the ore meeting happening in a fortnight, and decided to allow us to stay here with you. I’m sorry, mother. I—I tried to get him to come in.”

“I did as well,” Sansa insistent, looking at her mother’s blank face with worry. “But when he returns, I will refuse to leave with him unless he comes to see you! I swear it, mother.”

She remembered news about some Ore meeting—Edmure had departed two days ago for the same event.

Over Robbs shoulder, she saw her father scowling at her, blame in his eyes. She swallowed hard. Once again, her husband had shamed her; rejected her. He hated her so much now he wouldn’t even see her.

Her heart felt like it was rending in two.

“No—no, it’s fine. He is my lord husband, he is within his rights to punish me. I understand,” the words felt hollow, her throat tight.

Don’t you dare cry! A lady does not cry in public! A lady does not shame her House!

She smiled at her children, ignoring their worried looks, and said, “He has gifted me with your presence, and that is more than enough. When he allowed me to bring Bran and Arya with me, when he allowed you to visit me, I knew he would forgive me eventually. Take this as a lesson, Sansa, Arya, to obey your future husbands in all things,” she ordered, stern. Sansa nodded obediently,
looking faintly confused, while Arya scowled.

“But it wasn’t father who—”

“Sansa!” Robb hissed, and she widened her eyes, and immediately looked down, chastened.

Catelyn frown in bemusement, looking at her children.

“Robb? What did she mean? What didn’t Lord Stark do?”

He refused to look into her eyes, and her heart began to pound.

“Robb,” she said, voice tinged with desperation. Did they know something horrible? Did Ned plan to never take her back! Surely, he wouldn’t! “Robb, tell me!”

For once, Catelyn ignored the disproving looks form her father and the whispers between the servants. They could all go to the seven hells!

Robb slumped, looking at Sansa fiercely in reproached, before reluctantly meeting her eyes. “He didn’t want you to know. Jon, that is. He didn’t want me to tell you,”

Anger instantly churned in her gut. What lies had the bastard told them?

“It wasn’t father who decided to let you take Arya and Bran South with you—well, not alone—”

Catelyn heart began to pound in her ears, and her entire focus zeroed in on his words. She didn’t want to know—suddenly she didn’t want to know! But before she could stop him, Robb said “—Jon convinced him to let you take Bran and Arya, and to let us visit. Jon said...he said it wasn’t fair for a child to grow up without a mother, that he understood the feeling, and didn’t want it for us.”

That’s a lie. It has to be...after everything I did to him! He couldn't possibly have! No, Robb must be misinformed!

“Father told us not to tell,” Sansa said, guilty. “Because Jon did it for us, and not—not for you. I’m sorry, mother, I forgot.”

Catelyn Tully’s worldview began to crumble around her.

Chapter End Notes

A little explanation about Dark Sister. In canon, people don't know where it is, but some speculate Bryden took it North with him. I went with that theory, although it wasn't in the cave with Bran (as far as we saw). Now, as someone pointed out in the comments, this didn't happen in canon: Aemon didn't have the sword. This is true.

However, that's because so much is different here. In canon, Dany and Viserys were in Essos, and Bloodraven had no way to get the sword to them, even if he could. I'm not sure how much, if anything, he knew about Jon, but Jon had Longclaw, so I guess it didn't matter. Here, Bloodraven has been watching Jon for years through the weirwood tree, ever since his engagement with Dany. He decided that the best way to get Dark Sister back in Targaryen hands was to give it to Jon, who [updated since i changed my mind about Bloodraven knowing the truth] he knows is a Targaryen. In canon, he couldn't give him the sword because there was no way to do so without making people
suspicious of Jon's origins. Aemon thinks the letter meant that Jon would return it to Dany, as he was marrying her, but in reality, Bloodraven meant that it was to be Jon's from the start.

So, that's how the sword ended up with Aemon, and it wouldn't have been there in canon :)}
Nothing got Ser Clayton of House Sugg’s cock harder than a screaming woman. Watching their bodies break under his hands, watching them plead and cry as he fucked them, and watching them eventually stop making any sound at all… well, there was just nothing better than that.

Lately, his appetite had been wetted by the blond bitch that accompanied the Targaryen whore. She seemed to always be around him, had once accidentally run into him and nearly cried when she’d looked up into his eyes. She was the perfect target, but he had to be careful—she was nearly almost with the Targaryen. While Clayton would love to get his hands on the little dragon brat—he’d fantasized about her for years—Suggs wasn’t a fool. If he got anywhere near the girl, if he was caught doing anything at all to her, Stannis Baratheon would strap him down in the dungeons and Suggs would never see the light of day again.

Already the Lord of Dragonstone watched him carefully, even though Suggs was sure none of those other maids had dared to talk about what he’d done. He missed his childhood in Flea Bottom, where there were no nosy Lords restricting his pleasures. Gods, he hoped this fucking ore meeting would end soon and he could leave this place.

So, the Targaryen was out of his reach, but a maid? A lowborn bitch from King’s Landing? At first, he’d been hesitant about going after the woman, because of how close she seemed to be with the Targaryen. But just two days ago he’d stumbled across the girl talking to someone Suggs hadn’t seen about how the ‘princess was going to dismiss her soon’. Apparently, the blonde bitch’s days were numbered, which made perfect sense to Clayton: no lowborn girl would ever win the regard of a highborn royal. The Targaryen bitch wouldn’t care if anything happened to her maid—and if he got a little carried away? Well, who would even look for her? Suggs had to make his move soon, then, before she was gone.

At the moment, he stood in one of the narrow servants’ hallways, watching the bitch come towards him with a pile of linens in her arms. Her shoulders were hunched, and she was staring at the floor. Her blonde hair nearly covered her face, and her head was lowered so far he could see the thin needles she used to hold it in place shimmering in the sconce light. A timid one, this girl. All the better: she’d be even less likely to talk. And her skin looked so fragile—he couldn’t wait to get his hands on her.
She finally noticed him, and her blue eyes widened in fear. She immediately looked back down, but her body took on a just noticeable tremble. He smirked, crossing his arms and making a point of striding directly into her path. The girl stopped, looking around him for the best way to pass, but the servants’ hallways were too narrow for that.

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“Please, Ser,” she whispered, honey-toned voice trembling. Her screams would be pleasing to the ear—not shill like some other women’s. “I need to get this dress to the princess…she—she doesn’t like to be kept waiting. Please, my position…”

So she really is out of favor. Perfect.

Clayton made a point to spit on the ground, loudly, and chuckled at she flinched away. “I ain't stopping you.”

“I can’t get past you,” she whispered, hunching even further. “You’re too big.” Clayton nearly shivered in pleasure. Gods, she’d be fun. If only he could take her here, but these passageways were too well-traveled. There would be someone passing this way soon, and he’d never have his fun. No, this little meeting was just to get her scared—it always made it better.

He stepped towards her, and she retreated, raising to place one hand protectively on her head. The needles glinted. He nearly giggled in pleasure—would she try to use those scrawny needles to defend herself? Now that would be hilarious to see. Clayton kept advancing, and as he passed her, she made sure to crowed her against the wall, coming in close to show her how much stronger and larger he was. He heard a small sob, and his mouth stretched into an obscene grin.

He’d gotten exactly want he wanted. He continued on, whistling a happy tune.

Had he turned back to look at the apparently terrified girl, Clayton Suggs would have seen her raise her head and watch him walk away. A small, predatory smile stretched her lips.

The needles glinted in the firelight.

*****

As Ned Stark stood upon the deck of the ship Stannis had sent to ferry him to Dragonstone, he had to admit the castle was intimidating. He looked up at the black Keep perched upon the cliffs of the island, surrounded by tall, menacing walls intercut with small windows. Dragonstone, already a difficult place to conquer, was probably nearly impossible to siege now that Stannis Baratheon was its lord.

Ned let out a slow exhale, watching the island get closer. Various ships were anchored in the bay—ships denoting the sigils of various Westerosi houses, ships designed with the specific touches of the Free Cities, some sleek, some heavy, and some clearly built for war. Those latter ones he knew belonged to Stannis. They were prepared to defend the island and police their visitors. Stannis Baratheon was nothing if not prepared.

Ned signed again, deeper this time, and ignored the frequent worried looks being sent towards him by Jory Cassel, the captain of Winterfell’s guards. The man was dressed in full armor, with the Stark sigil carved into his breastplate. Despite Ned’s assurances to his friend that he was alright, Jory hadn’t stopped watching him since they’d left Riverrun.

Ned had stood there, impervious to Robb and Sansa’s pleas, looking up at the castle which housed his wife. He’d been conflicted, memories both good and bad warring for his attention.

Catelyn leaning against him, smiling serenely as they sat side by side in bed.
Jon’s timidity in the gods wood—his fear of hightborn women.

Catelyn holding Arya to her breast, smiling down at her as Ned sat beside her, sharpening his sword, soul at peace.

Robb’s pain when Jon easily beat him, his son’s realization that his own mother was forcing his brother to lose to him. The shaken confidence Robb now displayed, unsure of what his real skills were.

Catelyn personally caring for a sobbing washer-woman, after her husband was killed in a hunting accident. Catelyn’s insistence that the woman be allowed time off from her duties to grieve.

Sansa’s slow acclimation to a more northern education, the way she now spent more time with the older brother outside, the way her young shoulders no longer seemed so burdened.

Ned released another exhale. He didn’t know what to do. He wanted his wife back, he wanted his lady back, but he couldn’t forgive all she’d done.

Part of him believed she’d been punished enough—that six months were too long, especially considering it was he who should be punished, for forcing his wife to handle the shame of rising a bastard, for not being able to control his own household.

_I should have told her about Jon…maybe then this could have been avoided._

But Ned knew he wouldn’t. She could never know the truth—he couldn’t trust her with that information, especially not now. But he acknowledged his own part in this whole mess. His neglect of his own household had caused this, his tendency to live in the past, to avoid the future.

Ned Stark had spent the last six months contemplating the mistakes he’d made with his family. He loved them all, but he didn’t pay enough attention to them. Ned resolved to make it right. When he returned to Riverrun, he would sit down with Catelyn and have an open discussion about everything. Perhaps it would fix the negative emotions he’d unwittingly allowed to foster in his wife. He’d get her perspective on the matter, he’d try to understand.

He’d try to make her understand.

“M’lord, we’ve anchored. It’s time to row ashore.” One of the deck hands came towards them, and Ned turned to him, nodding.

“Aye. Let’s go, Jory.”

His companion nodded, and signalled to the ten men they’d brought with them. Soon, they were all seated in a small rowboat, and nearing the beach. Ned took a deep breath of the salty air, finding it rather pleasant. The bright morning sun reflected off the waves, turning the sea a brilliant blue. It was warm this far North—a warmth he’d nearly forgotten, after all these years.

He missed Winterfell.

“Has Lord Baratheon told you anything about this ore of his?” Jory asked, looking up at the imposing castle.

“No. Ser Davos Seaworth, his advisor, apparently insisted on pure secrecy. The man knows how to gather interest.” In truth, Ned was only partially interested in this ore. He was here for other reasons. Just as Stannis had some to evaluate Jon, Ned found himself curious about Daenerys Targaryen. What type of girl was she growing up to be?
Are Jon’s fears warranted? Ned wouldn’t be able to do anything if they were, but at least he’d know. He refused to ignore the truth any longer.

Jory nodded, looking around at all the ships. There had to be dozens of them. “Aye, that he does. I’ve never seen so many different types of vessels. What do you think it could be? Some of the lads at Winterfell are convinced he’s found out how to smelt Valyrian Steel.”

Ned looked at him, surprised. The Lord of Winterfell touched Ice, which he had sheathed at his side. “That would be a prize greater than gold, if true.”

“No wonder the Lannisters are here as well: their position as richest House would be displaced within the year.”

Ned looked towards where Jory was pointing, seeing a ship bearing the flag of House Lannister. The golden lion undulated in the wind, its claws ready to tear through its enemies. Whatever was about to happen, Ned felt that it would change things in Westeros—Valyrian Steel of not. Stannis had a reputation for being serious, and not wasting time. It was why so many Houses had answered the call.

This trip would be interesting.

*****

Stannis sat upon Dragonstone’s throne, welcoming the visiting lords, knights, magisters, and diplomats from the Free Cities. Cressen sat in a chair further down the stone steps, while Davos stood beside him. Myra was walking around the great hall, greeting people and ensuring they had everything they needed. His eyes followed her and she smiled and laughed with their guests, ever courteous. Sometimes he was awed by how easily she adapted to every role.

Seven hells, but he was tired. The people never ended, and four two months now he could barely take a breath before some other visitor wanted to speak to him. Most tried to inquire about the ore—but they’d been keeping silent, on Davos’s recommendation—while other simple tried to form a stronger bond to the crown.

Is he had to hear one more person trying to betroth their child to one of his own, he might just combust and order them all gone.

He missed his quiet, orderly home, and the presence of so many security risks was grating on his nerves. Already, his guards were stretched thin, and if too many more people arrived, he’d have to recruit guards from some other Houses.

Bloody hells, but who knew so many people would actually answer his letters? All he’d wanted was one or two from each general region—just enough to take some samples back with them and spread the word. Instead, it seemed every House in Westeros, most of the magisters in the Free cities, and some unwanted guests from the Slave Cities had sent their own representatives. Already the guest rooms in Dragonstone were nearly filled, the barracks were nearly overflowing with personal guards—many of which were from rival Houses or cities, which was just perfect—and soon he’d have to start sending his guests to Inns in the town, which would probably insult a few houses.

The great hall was filled with the bustle of hundreds of bodies, split interestingly into ‘categories’. Essos dominated the eastern half, while Westeros dominated the western. Amusingly, the representatives had formed small groups that almost mirrored their territory maps, and Stannis had quietly amused himself watching how the inclusion of a new House or magister would disrupt the positioning of the existing order. The geography of the room would shift, almost automatically, to
make room for a new member in their ‘proper’ place. It was almost like they were unconsciously replicating their pre-existing alliances and feuds, right there in Dragonstone’s massive main hall.

With so many different factions in one room, the place had a tense, dangerous atmosphere under the genial tones. Blood hells, but he was careful to watch them all in case some age-old blood feud made its presence known—or a new feud was kindled. Not even Robert’s court had ever stressed Stannis so much, and he’d quietly doubled the usually guard in the room.

Yes, Stannis wouldn’t mind if they all just disappeared back to their own bloody holes and left him in peace.

The single upside to this, besides the economic opportunity presented, was that Daenerys was having a wonderful time greeting the many different people, particularly those of Essos. The girl would hover, study her prey, and then strike before the magister or diplomat was aware of her, and then spend hours asking her victim every bloody question she could think of. When she was done, she’d float away and stalk around the room, followed closely by Tyene and Ser Justin, seeking her next prey.

Half of her victims came away smiling, most of the remaining seemed genuinely dazed, while a few would watch her leave with scowls and murder in their eyes. What she said to those particular people, he would rather not know.

At the moment, she was interceded from her next victim by Jaime Lannister, who stepped into her path with a mocking bow. She gave him an equally saccharine curtsey, and then took his offered arm. Stannis watched uncomfortably as Jaime led her around the room. The young Lion would periodically point to some lord or other and whisper something in her ear. She would then gasp in astonishment, or quickly place her hand over her mouth to halt a giggle.

“It’s likely the Princess is getting a rather interesting education about the lords and ladies of Westeros,” Davos murmured at his side, smothering a grin. “To be a fly on her shoulder during that conversation—I’m sure I’d learn enough embarrassing secrets to last me a lifetime.”

Stannis didn’t show anything on his face, but he exhaled slowly. “It’s not proper—she shouldn’t be so comfortable with him in public.”

Despite what Jaime had done for King’s Landing, he was still and man and, more importantly, still a Lannister. Stannis had gotten word that Kevan Lannister and a small with a small retinue had docked a few hours ago. They’d been given a set of rooms for the man, his wife, and their young daughter. The Lannisters had yet to make their appearance at court, which he was thankful for. He didn’t want them close to Daenerys, even if she insisted on spending time with Jaime.

“I’ve watched him carefully,” Ser Davos responded. “I can usually tell when a man looks at a child in ways he ought not to. Ser Jaime, whatever his faults, has no such interest in her. I’ve been told he has no interest in any woman, actually, for all the attention he’s paid them.

Stannis assessed the information, looking Jaime over carefully. “He is a Kingsguard.”

“Your pardon, my Lord, but not many men take their vows that seriously.”

Stannis was well aware of that. He’d briefly contemplated banning prostitution in the past, to stop his men from acting like fools and instead encourage them a proper wife. Myra had shot the idea down flat.

“You can ban prostitution, husband mine, when you find another way to give those women pay.”
He admitted to being stumped on that account.

“That boy’s either got a woman back in King’s Landing, or his tastes run to…other venues. Either way, I don’t think you have to worry about Ser Jaime. I rather think he’s fond of her. Difficult to escape that girl when she’s got her eye on you,” Davos said, amused.

Stannis couldn’t dispute that.

Stannis turned his attention back to the next guest that appeared before him. He was a magister from Pentos, and the largest man Stannis had ever seen. He stopped before the throne and gave a brief nod of his head, which made his whole body jiggle. Stannis could smell his sickening perfume despite the distance between them. The herald announced him as Magister Illyrio Mopatis.

“Welcome to Dragonstone,” Stannis said, only loud enough to be heard over the quiet murmuring of the crowd.

“Thank you, my lord. I must say, you have us all on a short leash! There are bets in Pentos about what this new ore is all about. Why, some speculate it’s the secret to Valyrian Steel!” the man laughed, garner more attention. The hall quieted as everyone paid more attention. In the Essosi side, translators were quick to whisper into their employer’s ears. Stannis sighed and met eyes with Davos.

“The presentation will occur in four days, magister. As a man of business, you can understand the importance of presenting your wares on schedule,” Davos stepped forward with a smile.

The magister glanced at him only briefly, before nodding. “Of course, of course. Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Baratheon.”

Stannis nodded, and the man drifted away benignly. He turned back to Davos, intending to resume their previous conversation, when the great door opened. He, as well as man interested eyes, turned to await the new arrival. Stannis nearly sighed with irritation. When would the new arrivals end?

“Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, Warden of the North,” announced the Herald. The murmurs quieted, and everyone paid attention as Ned Stark made his way into the hall. It was unexpected that the leader of a Great House came to the meeting himself, and many were aware of the rumors concerning Stark, his wife, and his bastard.

His hair was tied back, long face sober, and dressed in Northern leathers. Compared to the bright colors of Essos and the more subdued yet varied hues of Westeros, Ned stood out for his muted grey clothes. He was accompanied by a man in full grey armor. The only decoration on both of them was the Stark sigil.

Stannis relaxed, slowly. At least this was a welcome arrival.

Then his eyes flicked first to his wife, who was staring at Ned with no expression in her eyes, to Daenerys, who stared at lord Stark with a peculiar look on her face. Stannis began to feel uncomfortable. The Starks and the Targaryens had a complicated history, one that Daenerys was fully aware of, according to Cressen. He’d told her the man was coming, so she was prepared for it, but Stannis didn’t know what, if anything, she had planned.

“Lord Baratheon,” Ned said, stopping before the throne with a nod.

“Lord Stark,” Stannis returned, nodding back. “Welcome to Dragonstone. I trust your chambers are satisfactory.”

“I haven’t yet gone to them, my lord. But I’m sure they are.”
Stannis nodded again, aware that the other people in the room were watching. He didn’t quite know what they expected.

Stannis motioned to the small table to the left of the throne. “Bread and salt, my lord.” Stannis took some for himself, and then a servant behind the throne hurriedly took the bowl down to Lord Stark, who similarly ate a piece. The ancient tradition signified a peace agreement between host and guest. Every new arrival had made a similar gesture and bound themselves in the oath that they would harm no one during their stay. To break the tradition of guest rights was to have a black mark upon one’s house forevermore.

That done, the two men spoke about the journey, and slowly the attention of the other people faded. Soon, the crowd began to return to their own discussions, and Stannis noted how Ned’s shoulders gradually relaxed. Neither man enjoyed being the center of attention.

Finally, Ned excused himself, and Stannis made a note to send the man a missive so that they may have a more private discussion later, in his study.

As Ned began to walk back out of the great hall, Daenerys stepped into his path. Ned stopped in his tracks, immediately tensing when he beheld her. More and more people noticed, and the hall once again quieted. Hundreds of avid eyes were riveted on the scene. Myra began to make her way towards Daenerys, a worried look in her eye.

Stannis cursed quietly, shooting Ser Justin a punishing look, which the man returned helplessly. He, alongside Tyene and Jaime, stood in the crowd, looking as shocked to find Daenerys gone as Stannis was to see her step in Ned’s path.

“Lord Stark, my name of Daenerys of House Targaryen,” she announced clearly, looking up at Ned. Stannis wished he could see the other man’s face.

“My lady,” Eddard bowed slowly, but kept his eyes upon her. Daenerys curtseyed in return, but similarly did not drop her head.

For a moment, the two stared at each other, and Stannis opened his mouth and order Daenerys to step aside. He indulged her whims more often than not—perhaps too often—but not even she could so brazenly stand in the way of a Great Lord.

“On behalf of House Targaryen,” she began, voice clear—but with the slightest tremor. Stannis and Ned both tensed. “I ask your forgiveness for the crimes my House has committed against your family. They were evil deeds that deserved to be punished.” Complete silence in the hall, even Stannis was shocked. Ned’s form was completely still. Daenerys looked around uncertainly, swallowed and raised her chin again. “If you will allow me, my Lord, I can show you to your rooms.”

She waited, not looking directly at him, but staring rather at his chest. It seemed the bravery—or impulsivity—that had inspired her was fading, and now she seemed uncertain. Stannis exhaled slowly, shaking his head once. Would that girl ever cease to surprise him?

He knew first-hand how prideful she was. How much she loved her family and their history, despite acknowledging the evils they had committed. Asking forgiveness before all the world was difficult for anyone, but more so for a dragon—whose very blood rebelled against submission. She could easily have made this speech in private, with little risk to her pride, but she’d chosen to publicly declare her House’s sins instead. No one would blame Ned Stark for rejecting her entreat—or even for growing angry with her for daring to voice it. Many other men would not take kindly to this act.
Hundreds of eyes watched Ned Stark, and Stannis too awaited the verdict. This was between wolves and dragons—he had no place in this conflict.

Ned nodded, once, and raised his elbow slowly. Daenerys swallowed and then strode forward determinedly. She weaved her arm through Ned’s and together they walked down the path. Ser Justin woke from his stupor from when Tyene jabbed him with her elbow, and the two quickly followed.

Outside the door, as they turned towards the visitors’ wing, Stannis finally caught Ned Stark’s gaze. The other man stared ahead in faint bemusement.

Stannis’s lips curled.

*****

As Daenerys walked beside Lord Eddard Stark, she felt like an idiot. She’d thought it would be such a good gesture, to announce her speech before all the lords and ladies. She thought it would show him that she truly held no anger towards house Stark—that her father had been in the wrong.

Daenerys would be lying to say that she was content with how the Rebellion had ended. She’d wanted her brother to take the throne, not his murderer. Then everything would have been better—she would have family around her. Two brothers, a good-sister, a niece and nephew to play with. Perhaps her mother would have survived, had she a maester when Daenerys was born. Just because her father had been a monster didn’t mean the rest of her family was as well. Jaime told her that Rhaegar would have been a good king—that he would have returned to King’s Landing and taken the crown from their father.

**But Rhaegar was also the one who abandoned Elia and her children…**

So many confusing facts in the world. So many confusing customs.

“Jon and I exchange letters,” Daenerys told the man beside her. She looked up into his face. Long brown hair tied back from his face. A serious look in his eye. A somber mood around him. Daenerys thought that Eddard Stark seemed…sad.

**Everyone tells me Jon looks like you. But is he like you?**

“I see,” the man murmured, glancing down at her carefully. She liked the way he spoke—his accent. She wondered if Jon sounded like him as well. His eyes were kind, despite the sadness. Like cousin Stannis, his face was remote, but Daenerys had gotten accustomed to looking into one’s eyes to see their emotions. The eye’s told the truth.

“We learned of the Sack. Of Elia and Rhaenys and Aegon,” she said, quiet. The silent man beside Lord Stark shot her a horrified look. Daenerys looked straight ahead. “I wanted to thank you…for trying to get justice for them.”

Ned took a breath and let it out, slowly. “I see.” There was regret and anger in the words. “A young girl shouldn’t be burdened with such things.”

She shook her head, denying the statement. “If I remain ignorant of the past, how can I make my own decisions? And Jon promised me.”

Ned blinked down at her, genuinely startled. “What?”

Daenerys nodded. “He promised to be honest, so that I am never unsure of his mind. He will be my
husband, you see, and I want him to share with me. And I will share with him. That’s what our marriage will be like.”

Ned Stark just stared at her, a peculiar light in his eyes. “What if he does something one day…that brings shame upon you? Something that hurts you.”

Dany squinted up at him, but thought about it carefully. “Well…I will be angry. I may yell at him a lot, too. I’m not sure, my lord.”

Ned looked away, signing. “No, of course not.” He shook his head, but Dany thought the gesture was for himself rather than her.

She contemplated him, this sad man. Didn’t Jaime tell her that Lady Catelyn left Lord Stark? Maybe he did something to her. Feeling sorry, Dany hedged, “Maybe if he spoke to me about it, about his reasons? If he apologized to me, because he understands that it hurt. Oh, and if he listened to me yelling at him—that would make me feel better, I think. But then it could be fixed. A lot of things can be fixed, if people simply spoke instead of fought. Do you not agree?”

Ned contemplated her, a gentle light in his eye. “Yes…maybe it can.”

They walked in silence for a few more minutes, until they finally reached the guest wing. Dany quickly asked a servant about Lord Stark’s chambers, and they made there way to his door. He paused and looked down at her. “Thank you, my Lady.”

She curtseyed. “My lord…?”

“Aye?”

Suddenly a bit shy, Dany looked to the floor. “Would you tell me stories of Jon while you’re here? He doesn’t like to speak of himself very much. I think he’s shy,” she whispered, a smile curling her lips.

Ned smiled, very faint but there. “Aye. I will.”

She grinned up at him, relieved. “I will ask cousin Stannis that you dine with us tonight! He speaks of you fondly, my lord, as does Jon.”

His eyes warmed, just a bit. “I look forward to it, my lady.”

With a final nod to her, he and his guard retreated to their rooms.

Dany breathed deeply and exhaled. She was pleased with the exchange.

As they walked back to the grand hall, she took Tyene’s hand and leaned in closely. “Do you think that went well?”

She maid laughed. “I think you nearly stopped my heart, m’lady, when you suddenly walked into his path.”

“Mine as well,” Ser Justin bemoaned. “Guarding you had taken years off my life.”

“Yes, maybe that wasn’t the…best move,” Daenerys admitted, shooting Justin an annoyed look. “But I wanted Lord Stark to know I was serious.”

“He will certainly not underestimate you, m’lady,” Tyene murmured, squeezing her hand before gently letting go and stepping farther away, head bowed. Dany frowned at the action. Lately, it
seemed as if Tyene was distancing herself, although only in public. Perhaps the influx of strangers was making her shy?

“Lord Stark values honesty, my princess,” Ser Justin said. “He will have appreciated your gesture.”

“As will the Northmen who hear of this,” murmured Tyene.

“I wanted everyone to know that I am not my father,” Dany admitted. “And that House Targaryen does not have quarrel with House Stark. Besides, I am to live in his lands—I cannot allow bad blood between us. Myra has taught me the importance of good relationships with those that are above you. It is fortunate he is a good man.”

They stared at her, Tyene smiling and Ser Justin impressed.

“That’s exactly right, m’lady. That’s exactly right.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy birthday to toaquiprashippar :D
Thank you for the soul!
Bastard's Mercy

Chapter Summary

A battle, a story, a threat, and a letter.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, I reached 100K! :D

So, let's have a quick chat. This story is rated M, with the appropriate warning, so readers should be prepared for adult content and difficult themes. However, I acknowledge that the story can still be enjoyed even when certain sections are skipped, so I will include a note in cases of potentially disturbing content. If a note wasn't there, then I didn't find the content personally disturbing, which is just something subject to interpretation.

Anyways enjoy the long chapter! :D

It would take them about eight days to get to Eastwatch by the Sea, or so Lord Commander Mormont informed them when they left. Already, five had passed. After Aemon’s revelation, Jon had asked Oberyn to remain another week, and the Prince, curious himself, had agreed. They’d spent most of the time with Aemon, who had been delighted to tell them stories about his youth, about his father and brother. Oberyn had seemed like a boy then, eager for tales, and Jon again was glad he’d chosen the prince. There was an ageless quality about him, as if Oberyn Martell would always be young, despite his physical features. He had an interest and fascination with the world that Jon rarely saw in others, and it inspired Jon’s own desires to know.

But eventually, the week had ended, and they’d said goodbye to the maester. Jon had sent Daenerys another letter, along with a present he hoped she’d like. He hadn’t told her about Dark Sister, which he kept strapped to his back. It was too dangerous to say through a letter. Even while he slept, Jon kept on hand around the on the linen-covered sword. It was his responsibility now, the first true responsibility someone had given him, and a Valyrian Steel sword was much too precious to lose. And in wildling-plagued territory, an ambush was always likely—or so they’d been warned.

“You think we’ll really see wildlings?” Jon asked Oberyn, whose horse meandered casually beside his own. The stallion’s thick black coat shimmered in the afternoon light, despite the constant cloud cover. Around them, pines rose high into the air, but nothing could beat the huge Wall that could always be seen soaring into the sky. Just looking up at it was enough to make Jon feel like he was falling, so he now avoided the behavior.

“Ah, one can hope, boy,” Oberyn responded. “I did not think the North would be this dull. A good battle—that is what I need.”

Jon rolled his eyes. “You spent most of that last week prodding the Lord Commander into matches—he wasn’t an easy opponent.”
Oberyn looked at him with a smirk. “I admit, despite his dour attitude, the man built up quite a rage after his son’s shame was discovered. It was amusing to rile him up. Unfortunately, I could never be serious with such a man; he is talented, but past his prime. I can not have his death on my hands, lest my brother decided to feed me some dreadful poison in punishment.”

Jon ignored the last part—he had no doubt a brother of Oberyn Martell would do such a thing, but he knew the poison would not be lethal. The Dornish were a strange people—or the Martells were. Jon shot Oberyn a troubled look for a different reason. “Is that what you want? To kill someone?”

Oberyn tsked. “I am no mad man, boy, so put that look away. I simply wish to fight seriously. It is unfortunate that when I do, others perish. Their lack of skill is not my folly.” He smiled at Jon, raising his arms to stretch. “This is why you must grow up soon, broody boy, and show me a real contest with that sword of yours.”

Jon glanced reflexively at Dark Sister, which he had sheathed over his shoulder. The whole thing was covered by a thick brown cloth. At this point, the longsword was too long for him. Oberyn estimated that Jon would have to grow at least another head taller than his current 4ft and 6 inches. Obeyrn himself was just a couple inches under six feet, and in his hand, Dark Sister was easy to wield.

“Do you think I could? Really challenge you?”

“I do. Perhaps be better. At the sword, anyway. We will see about your skill with a spear, but I have met no man who can best me with it.”

Jon glanced at the long spear on Oberyn’s back, the one he never used. He wasn’t arrogant enough to believe that he could beat Oberyn with his weapon of choice, especially when he himself had only learned the sword, bow, and lance.

The wind blew through the trees, hitting Jon square in the face. The young boy shivered: even in the height of summer, it was freezing at the Wall. Every night when they made camp, Jon could barely get warm enough to sleep, even when he sat so close to the fire Oberyn one had to nudge him away when he rolled to close while asleep. He’d woken up with his hand pink and stinging all over.

“I’ve never seen you use it,” Jon noted, nodding at the spear.

Oberyn smile was quicksilver, and just as cutting. “Ah, boy. This spear is only in my hand when there is blood to be drawn.”

Jon glanced back at Dark Sister, remembering Aemon’s warning about it hungering for blood. He shivered again, for a different reason. He hoped he never had to use it for such a thing.

Oberyn suddenly stopped his horse, and swung his arm in front of Jon’s path. The boy jerked his own garron to a halt, shooting Oberyn a surprised look. The amusement in the man’s eyes was gone, and he scanned the forest.

“Well, looks like we’ve got a couple o’ little girls here,” a gruff voice said, and Jon looked around as a group of people began to surround them. There were seven in total, all wearing ragged furs and leather. Each one had their heads covered by a white hood, and only the hungry smile and crooked teeth. Most were yellow, but a few looked like they were beginning to rot.

Wildlings. They really could get over the wall! Jon was a little awed by that.

Three of them carried iron axes, another a long spear, while the three remaining had bows trained on them. Jon looked around, scanning them with care and trying to angle his body so they were all in
sight. It was made difficult because some of them emerged from directly behind them. Jon shot Oberyn a worried look, but the Prince looked relaxed.

The one who’d spoken was tall with a shaggy beard. He was the one with the spear, and he twirled it casually in his hand. He reached up and took his hood down, revealing dark hair and cold brown eyes. Jon was surprised to see he was fairly young—perhaps only a few years older than Jon himself. “How’s bout you two get off them horses and give’em over. Less you want t’ die, that is.”

Oberyn smoothly drew his own spear, tilting his head when the three archers nocked their arrows. “Now, now, there is no need for that, friend.”

“He sounds like a damn southerner,” one of the other boys shouted, ax in hand. “Looks like one too.”

“I’ve never seen someone like ‘im afore.” Another voice said, and Jon was surprised to hear it was female. It came from one of the archers. “He’s got some pretty, pretty clothes. Think I want that nice red coat o’ his.”

“The little girls got a nice black cloak ‘erself. I’ll take that, Terr!” One of the other archer, a boy with a creaking voice, declared, laughing. Jon shot him an angry look, but otherwise ignored the slight.

Oberyn dismounted smoothly, shooting Jon a quiet look. Jon understood; they’d planned for this. His heart began to pound harder, and he felt a little sick watching Oberyn casually hold his spear.

_This spear is only in my hand when there is blood to be drawn._

Oberyn took a step towards the leader, casual and relaxed. “Can we not discuss this like men? Perhaps share a meal together instead of fighting—we have enough provisions for all of you.”

They glanced amongst each other, and Jon saw their hesitation. _They’re hungry._

“We ain’t supping with some fucking southerners!” The leader declared. He pointed his spear at Oberyn, and the archers snapped at attention. “Now, off that horse, little girl, and you drop that spear o’ yours! We’ll just take what we want, like Free Folk should!”

_Free folk?_

The others nodded, mouths growing more resolute. Oberyn tsked softly.

Jon looked around, hesitant, but then took a breath. Slowly, he began to dismount, eyes on the archers, who were ignoring him in favor of Oberyn.

In one quick move, Jon smacked his garron on the back, scaring the horse into galloping forward with a loud, startled squeal. The archers panicked and swung after the horse, and Jon ran into the trees at his left. An arrow whizzed past just as he ducked behind a large oak. Behind him, the sounds of battle raged, and despite Oberyn’s orders to remain out of the way in cases of ambush, he peeked around the tree. The leader was on the ground, motionless, and bleeding into the snow.

Jon watched, amazed, as Oberyn used his spear to vault to the left, and in the same movement drove the tip through the throat of one of the archers. The girl gurgled and fell down, dead. The Prince used his spear to deflect an oncoming arrow, and then raced towards one of the boys with an ax, ducking his opponent’s blow and driving his spear into his chest. Oberyn swung around and drove his bloody weapon into the gut of a second ax-wieldier, killing her just as his first opponent hit the ground.

Another arrow was quickly dodged, but Oberyn didn’t see the last archer, who was about to shoot
him from behind. On instinct, Jon grabbed a rock and hurled it at the boy, hitting his hand just as he loosed the arrow. It went wide and grazed Oberyn’s shoulder, making the man grunt in pain.

Jon ran out from the tree and tackled the boy who’d wounded Oberyn into the snow and mud-covered ground. The two boys wrestled, Jon punching him in the face and dodging his returned blows. He managed to pry the bow away from him and threw it away, just as his opponent dislodged him and punched him brutally in the jaw. Jon tasted blood.

They struggled there in the snow, and over his opponents’ shoulder, Jon saw Oberyn taking out the final ax-wieldier with a brutal thrust through the chest. That’s when Jon noticed the quill of arrows on the boy’s back. Narrowing his eyes, Jon grabbed a handful of snow and threw it into the other boy’s eyes, giving Jon the time to pull one of the arrows free and hop on top of his surprised opponent. He raised the arrow, prepared to thrust it down, when a girl screamed, “Torwynd!”

Jon jerked to a halt just an instant from piercing his opponent’s neck, staring down at the wide-eyed, terrified boy.

Jon looked up, not moving the arrow, to see a girl staring at him, pleading and anger in her watery gaze. Around them, the others were dead. Oberyn stood amongst the corpses, gripping his spear, and left arm hanging at his side, dripping blood. The man watched Jon with interest, ignoring the wound.

Jon looked down at his opponent, noting his petrified eyes, and swallowed hard.

“Let him go! We’ll leave, I promise!” The girl rasped, her own bow and arrow held limp at her sides.

“Munda, run!” the boy begged, but she just shot him a quelling look, and met Jon’s eyes. It was the pleading in them that got to him, the love and fear.

“Drop your bow and back away,” Jon ordered.

“Don’t—” Jon dug the arrow in deeper, shooting Torwynd a quelling look. A drop of blood emerged.

Slowly, reluctantly, Munda did as bid. She drew off her hood, and Jon saw red hair and blue eyes. He glanced down at the boy underneath him, seeing the similarity. Siblings.

“If you let them go, they’ll just continue raiding,” Oberyn imparted, but there wasn’t an order or condemnation in the tone, just fact. Jon got the idea that it was up to him. Jon paused, scanning his captive, debating.

“If I let you go,” Jon said, meeting Munda’s gaze, “You have to go back North. And you have to swear that you won’t return, nor raid any other villages.”

She met his eyes, assessing. Jon thought she couldn’t be much older than he was. “Why would you let us go?” she asked, suspicious.

Jon shook his head, bemused. “One moment you ask me to, and the next you don’t believe me when I do?”

“All you southerners have no honor,” the boy under him muttered. Jon glared at him.

“I can’t speak for other people, but I keep my word. Swear that you’ll go back, and not raid us anymore, and I’ll let you go.”

Munda looked him over, assessing, and Jon retained her gaze. Slowly, she nodded. “Aye, then. My
bargain and I won’t raid these lands anymore. You have my word as a Free Folk.”

Jon glanced down. “You too.”

Torwynd swallowed, and eyes mistrusting, he echoed his sister.

Right as he was about to get up, Jon paused. Would they attack the second he backed away? Was he being an idiot?

He met Munda’s gaze, seeing the hardening in her eyes. *She’s just a person.* With a breath, Jon got off him and stood. He kicked Torwynd bow further out of his reach, just in case. Jon backed up until he was right beside Oberyn. Glancing up, he saw interest in the man’s eyes, not disapproval like he expected. Jon’s shoulder’s relaxed. Together, they watched as Munda ran forward, helping her brother to his feet.

“You kept your word,” Munda said, almost shocked.

Jon met her eyes squarely. “Keep yours.”

She scowled. “Free Folk always keep their word!”

Jon remained silent. After a few moments of just staring at each other, still suspicious, the siblings began to retreat.

“Why did you come here?” Jon called out, unable to help himself.

They two paused, surprised. They met each others’ eyes, and then looked back at him. “These are *our* lands. You southerners are the ones that built a wall to keep us out!”

Jon shook his head, frowning. “You’re always raiding and killing people!”

She glared at him. “If your people can’t protect themselves, then you don’t deserve what you have.”

“Fair point,” Oberyn acknowledged, leaning on his spear. They all shot him surprised glances. He shrugged. “I have been to many places, and that idea is quite common. Of course, they are rarely peaceful places.”

The siblings looked uncertain, obviously not sure how to feel about that.

“Tell me, is it common for children to raid alone amongst your people?” the prince asked, curious.

Torwynd looked away, and Munda glared, challenging “We ain’t children!” A blush was raising in her cheeks.

“Ah ha,” the prince murmured slowly. “The rebelliousness of youth. Take care, *child*, that your restlessness does nor get you killed.”

Faces blanching, both sobered and glanced around at their dead companions with sorrow. Jon felt his stomach clench.

“We will arrive at Eastwatch soon, and then the Night’s Watch will be out in full to hunt you down. Go home,” Oberyn ordered. “And remember this day. Remember that you were spared by a ‘southerner’ with honor.”

Jon shot him a look, hearing the faint pride in the Prince’s voice. He felt color in his cheeks and pride in his chest, even though he felt mixed about letting them go. He’d grown up with stories of the
Wildling’s actions. They were hated by all the North…

But Jon couldn’t bring himself to kill people who had already surrendered.

The siblings glanced at each other, then at Jon.

“What is your name?” Munda demanded, meeting his eyes squarely.

“Jon Snow,” he answered, quietly. No recognition shone in her eye. She didn’t know what a bastard was.

She nodded. “I will remember this, Jon Snow.”

And with that, they disappeared beyond the trees.

“They may not keep their word,” Oberyn murmured. “They may return, and kill others. That will be your responsibility, Jon.”

“I know,” he nodded, sober. “But they’d already lost.” He looked up at Oberyn, unsure. “I felt like…like if I’d killed them, it would have been murder.” He slumped. “I suppose that makes me a coward.”

Oberyn places his hand upon Jon’s head, like that day in the Godswood. “Ah, boy. A coward would have killed them. You chose to trust your enemy, instead. That is bravery.”

Jon frowned harder. “That sounds like a fool’s act.”

What would Daenerys think of what I did? Would she understand?

Oberyn chucked. “I did not say a coward is also an idiot, nor that the brave man is also wise.”

Jon watched him walk away, disgruntled and still uncertain of his actions. He turned back towards where the siblings had gone, heartsick with the idea that they may one day return to kill his people, his fathers’ people. Or perhaps one of the men at the Night’s Watch would die by their blade, if not in Westeros, then in the lands beyond the Wall. And Jon could have prevented it.

Thoughts in turmoil, he was vaguely aware of Oberyn saying he’d return with the horses. Jon took a fortifying breath and turned away. He’d made his choice, and he would live with it.

That’s when he remembered where he was, and looked around at the bodies strewn about. Blood, gore, and sightless eyes. Children just older than he.

Carnage and death.

Jon ran to a tree and vomited until his throat was raw and tears tracked down his cheeks.

*****

Ned Stark had not expected Daenerys Targaryen.

That moment when she’d stepped before him in the throne room, gaze fierce, Ned had prepared himself for condemnation: for a child’s hatred towards the part he’d played in the Rebellion. Ned knew that Robert was not kind to her, that his once brother-by-choice was taking out his anger and bitterness on an innocent child. That he was poisoning her against them all, and that in her eyes he was probably the villain.
Ned Stark did not expect her to know what truly happened in the Rebellion. About her Father, about his father and Brandon and Lyanna. Ned could not imagine burdening a young girl with such things. He pictured Sansa, who was sweet and quick to cry at sad songs, and how she’d never be strong enough to deal with the harsh truth of the world. Ned needed to protect his children, not tell him gruesome tales.

So, when she’d apologized to him, in front of the realms, he’d been speechless. Her sincerity, her regret and anger at what had occurred, the somber knowledge in his eyes…

Ned hadn’t been able to do much but stand there in shock. It had taken him an eternity to hold out his arm to her, to allow her to lead him to his room.

This brave child, who acknowledged injustice and sought peace over war. This unexpected child who walked into a grown man’s path—a great Lord—and bravely met his eyes…Ned could not hate her.

Had Ned been a different man, had he been Robert, he would have thrown the apology in her face. He would have raged at her for daring to speak of the past, at the thoughtlessness of such an action done in public. What risk she had taken, this impulsive child. Had Ned been a Southerner, her act would have embittered things between them.

But Ned Stark was of the North, and they were a people who preferred frank honesty over games and insinuations and quiet, shamed apologies in empty rooms. The young girl had steel in her veins, and he could never hate such a person.

So before all the realm, he’d given her his arm; silently declaring the end of their feud, and mending the bond between two Great Houses.

A motion before him caught his eye, and he saw Stannis pour him a glass of rich amber liquid. The smell of strong liquor tickled his nose.

“A gift from Volantis: a rare drink, if the ambassador is to be believed. Robert would prefer such a thing, not I. But you look like you could use some. Davos tells me drinking is a ‘social tradition,’ but I rather think he uses it as an excuse to partake in rum and avoid my condemnation.”

Normally, Ned would have refused the gift. He did not drink; there were too many secrets behind his lips to risk it. But Stannis was right, at the moment, it was a welcome respite. He took a sip, grimacing at the strong flavor.

He swirled the liquid, stating, “Your ward is…unexpected.”

Stannis signed, rubbing his temple. “Yes, many have come to think so. She is friends with Jaime Lannister, Eddard,” Stannis muttered, shaking his head. “If I try to halt it, she demands I provide a good argument for why she should stop.”

“You are her guardian,” Ned said, frowning at the idea of the Lannister boy. Oathbreaker. “That should be reason enough.”

Stannis shot him a look. “She stood before you and all the world and apologized, Eddard Stark. Unless I break her spirit, that girl will not heed anyone’s worlds blindly.”

Ned felt a reluctant smile curve his lips. “Jon has no idea what awaits him.”

Or maybe he has an idea, depending on these letters. He found himself supremely curious of what two such children would say to one another.
Two Targaryens…

Ned banished the thought and took another gulp. The liquid was worse the second time.

Stannis took an experimental drink, grimacing and nudging the glass away. “Oberyn Martell once told me that I would be an unfit guardian for your son.”

Ned blinked, surprised. “What?”

Stannis nodded. “He said I am too…complacent, with others. That I require a person to tell me exactly what they think, else I make assumptions.”

The words hit too close to home for Ned, and he rubbed his temple in pain. “Aye, that sounds familiar.”

“Jon would keep it all covered, with men like us. We’d never know his heart.”

Ned took another gulp, but then set it aside. He was beginning to feel lightheaded. “What is your point, Stannis? That I am an unfit parent?”

Stannis frowned at him, bemused. “What? No. I meant to reassure you. Daenerys will never allow your son to hide things from her. She will pay him the attention he needs and demand he open himself to her, and he, in turn, will listen to her without dismissal and value her strength rather than attempt to smother it. They will fit each other.”

Ned stared at him. Then he chuckled. “Aye, Stannis. It seemed Oberyn Martell was correct, the bloody arsehole. We do in fact make assumptions before hearing the whole story.”

Stannis shook his head. “I should have been born in the North, Stark. None of these southern games.”

“The Northmen have their own games, Stannis. Open, loud, and honest: but games all the same. You would have wanted them all dead the moment they opened their mouths and made grand declarations on impulse, and then found themselves trapped by their own words.” Ned shook his head, both amused and frustrated.

Stannis contemplated this, eyes narrowed. “Perhaps they would have frustrated me. But at least they’d have been honest. During my first year as Lord of Dragonstone, I saw nothing but polite smiles and welcoming words, all with daggers hidden. Had it not been for Myra and Daenerys, these people would never have accepted me as their Lord.” Stannis shook his head. “Dragonstone would have remained a nightmare.”

Ned shook his head, leaning back. “How one act changes everything.”

A knock on the door. Stannis bid them enter. A young kitchen maid curtseyed deeply. “Dinner is prepared, my Lords. Lady Myra begs your presence in the private dining hall.” She curtseyed again and departed.

The men rose to their feet and made their way to the private dining hall, which was situated a level above the public one, where the guests were having their meals. Stannis was not in the mood to dine with hundreds of pseudo-polite lords and ladies and their prejudices against one another. Unless absolutely necessary, they took dinner in private. Ned was the first to be invited amongst them.

They arrived to find Stannis’s wife, son, and Daenerys Targaryen gathered around an ornate, rectangular wooden table. The were depictions of dragons on the walls, holding sconces in their
claws, and large windows showing the blackwater beyond. Tapestries of House Baratheon decorated the walls.

Lady Myra was seated at the center of the twelve person-table, with Lady Daenerys to her left and young Lord Steffon to her right. Two more places were set at the opposite side, one before Myra, and the other before Daenerys. The girl seemed to be bouncing with excitement, shooting Ned expectant looks.

Quietly amused at the hint, Ned took his spot before her, and Stannis sat beside him and opposite his wife. The table was set with an array of roasted poultry, boar, and fish. Broths contained in small bowls were places beside each plate, with a large piece of fresh bread beside them. An array of boiled eggs, hams, sausages, and cheeses were laid out, as well a small platter to the side was filled with an array of sweets, which Stannis son was eyeing in longing.

“Thank you for joining us, Lord Stark,” Stannis’s wife smiled in welcome. “I hope our food is pleasing when compared to a Northern diet.”


For a few minutes, they gathered their food onto their plates in silence. Stannis served Myra and Daenerys, while the men and Steffon served themselves. Ned cut into his roast pork, taking a bite and enjoying the flavor.

Ned watched the others follow dinner etiquette he did not know, but was not too worried about it. They didn’t concern themselves so much with things like that in the North. While Catelyn had already maintained her southern manners, and taught her children the same, Ned didn’t much care about such traditions. Food was to be enjoyed, as were one’s companions.

“Is it very cold in the North, Lord Stark?” Steffon asked, leaning forward curiously.

“Aye, lad. Much colder.”

“Cousin Stannis says that Moat Cailin was not nearly so cold as Winterfell, and Jon has promised that the architects are designing large fireplaces in my rooms. I like the heat.” Daenerys informed him, smiling unsurely. She seemed much more hesitant now. It seemed that after her declarations, she wasn’t sure how to continue their conversation.

Or perhaps she was holding back before Stannis and his wife.

“Winterfell is much farther North, my lady. When compared to the wall, Winterfell is seen as warm. And I imagine the Wall is warm, when compared to the far north.”

She leaned forward, eyes excited. “Do you mean the Land of Always Winter? Maester Cressen told me stories about it. He says that the Wall was built to keep out wildlings, but I think it must have been for the ‘Others’. I cannot imagine why someone would build such a massive thing just to keep out raiders.”

He smiled faintly. “Aye, if the stories are true, my ancestor built the wall to keep out the evil magic in the world. Old Nan, a very old nurse at Winterfell, would tell my siblings and I stories of the creatures beyond the Wall, as she now tells my children.”

At the mention of his siblings, her eyes dimmed, and she looked away. Daenerys took an uncomfortable bite of her chicken, chewing and looking everywhere but at him. Stannis and Mya focused on their food, while Steffon looked around at the tense atmosphere in confusion.
Ned cursed silently, he hadn’t meant to ruin the mood with ghosts. He looked around for something to say, but couldn’t think of anything.

“Were the sea’s kind, my Lord?” Lady Myra asked him, a hint of pity in her voice. “I have never taken such a long voyage before.”

“Aye,” he replied, grateful. “Fair weather the whole time. I have your husband to thank for loaning me one of his ships.”

She smiled. “Stannis was pleased that you could come, my Lord. As was Daenerys. She has many questions about the North, and particularly about…your son.”

Ned ignored the hesitation, and turned back to Daenerys. “Ask, my Lady.”

Slowly relaxing, Daenerys launched into many questions about the North, some of the Houses, and her own future home. Ned answered as best he could, entertained by her curiosity. Her eyes would light up when she thought of a new question, or when he told her a particularly interesting bit of information. By the end, he got the sense that she was a girl who would love to travel and see what the world had to offer, unlike Ned and Stannis, who preferred the comforts of their own Keeps.

Then she turned her attention to Moat Cailin, and more personal matters. “Jon told me it is made of white stone that shines in the sunlight, and that the plans are very pleasing to the eye. Has it gotten much taller since he left?”

Ned nodded. “I crossed the moat on my way South. The walls have risen to twice my height now. With the foundation laid, the rest of the castle should go up swiftly. Then only the final touches remain. Carvings and decorations and the like. The village is the last thing to be built, but that won’t be for many years yet. Everything will be furnished and populated following that.”

“How many more years, do you estimate?” Stannis inquired, biting into a piece of bread dipped in broth.

“Benjen and the architect tell me all should be finalized by Lady Daenerys’s sixteenth year. In time for the wedding.”

Daenerys perked up, excited. “I cannot wait to see it all finished. With Jon now squiring for Prince Oberyn, there is no one to tell me the progress. I do not even know where he will end up, one month to the next. In his last letter, he mentioned leaving, but not to where, and I have no gotten a letter since. Prince Oberyn is a very unpredictable man.” There was something like admiration in the words.

Ned signed. “Aye, Prince Oberyn has proven himself to be a… difficult man. No one expected them to head North.”

“Do not worry, my Lord,” Daenerys assured him, smiling. “Jon says he’s glad to have seen the Night’s Watch. He says he learned much about the realm—that he prefers to face the truth.”

Ned felt the words like a blow, and hid it by swiftly taking another bite of his pork. *He wants the truth…and I’ve lied to him for years. I will continue to do so, for as long as I can.*

“Eddard?” Stannis questioned, and Ned jerked, realizing he’d been staring at his food.

“Apologies, it has been a long day.”

They nodded, sympathetic. “Perhaps you should retire, my Lord,” Myra suggested kindly.
Ned shook his head. “It is alright, simply a momentary preoccupation, my Lady.”

They continued on, discussing the banal things like as the upcoming ore meeting in three days’ time. Ned didn’t bother asking for more information; he’d learn about it eventually, as would the other guests. He did note with interest how Daenerys let slip that it would ‘change the game’ although she didn’t understand why.

“Lord Stark?” he turned to Steffon. “Father tells me Dany’s betrothed is talented with a sword.”

“Aye, lad. More so than my other son.”

Steffon looked interested. “Is that why Prince Oberyn took him as his squire? My master-at-arms has told me that the Prince is one of the greatest fighters in the world.”

“He even founded his own mercenary company in Essos,” Daenerys informed them, sounding impressed. Steffon looked at her with awe.

“Aye,” Ned said, “Jon’s talent is what drew the Prince’s attention.”

Daenerys glanced up at him, something odd on her face, before she looked away. She seemed uncomfortable as she stirred her broth, a small frown on her face. She tucked her hair behind her ear, which was braided with blue ribbons to compliment her sky-blue gown.

“Will you tell me a story about Jon?” she asked, putting the previous matter aside and smiling up at him.

“Lord Stark is tired, my love,” Myra gently chided, but Ned shook his head.

“No, it’s alright. Jon isn’t a boy who likes talking about himself. It’s natural to be curious.”

Myra smiled, but it was more brittle than earlier. “Of course.”

Ned contemplated her, and suddenly knew just the story he would tell. “There is a man named Walder, at Winterfell. He is the largest person I’ve ever seen. Some would say he has giant’s blood. He is simple of mind, and the only word he can say is ‘Hodor’.”

“Hodor?” Steffon asked, perplexed. “What does that mean?”

“Steffon, mind your manners,” Stannis rebuked coolly. The boy flushed and apologized for interrupting.

“We do not know, lad. He spoke when I was a young, but one day he suddenly ceased, and that was all he could say. My children and most of the people in Winterfell simply call him Hodor, now.”

Daenerys looked sad, Steffon curious, Myra politely patient, and Stannis disinterested.

“Two years ago, a group of boys were throwing stones at Hodor—taunting him. The man, while larger than any other, is gentle and kind. He is not of the temperament to harm another.” Daenerys face was darkening with anger. “I noticed from the upper windows, but before I could intercede, Jon did.”

That got all their attention.

“Many of the boys were larger than him, and few were…kind to Jon, when they believed no one was watching. The boys got into a massive fight, right there on the muddy ground, before I interceded. Jon took Hodor to maester Luwin, and stayed with him until his every wound was
treated. He warned the boys that if he ever caught them harming Hodor again, he would find them, and pay them back for every hit. And he was serious—Jon does not break his word, and they all knew it. When asked about him, he said that no one deserved to be harmed for circumstances out of their control, and it was the responsibility of the House to protect their people.”

Ned met Myra’s eyes, which had softened, just the slightest bit. “Jon isn’t a man who will harm those weaker than him.”

He then looked to Daenerys, who was smiling softly. “He protects them, my lady.”

*****

Jaime Lannister hadn’t seen his uncle in years. Kevan Lannister stayed at his father’s side, a willing and eager right hand to the Lord of Lannister. Unlike his other uncle’s Keven did not begrudge his position of Tywin’s inferior—he accepted it and regarded his elder brother with pride, and did all he could to aid Tywin in ensuring the prosperity and longevity of House Lannister.

“Jaime. How goes your position as Kingsguard?” The man asked coolly, and Jaime heard the faint disapproval. While his father was convinced that Ayers had taken Jaime into the Kingsguard against his will, Kevan had somehow always known it was Jaime’s choice. And he’d never approved of it, seeing it as giving up his birthright. To uncle Kevan, any act that went against Tywin’s wishes was met with disapproval.

They didn’t understand: Jaime was not fit to rule a Keep, not like his father, not like his younger brother. He didn’t have the patience for it.

“Well, uncle. I am protecting my sister and her children. There is no greater calling.”

Kevan smiled. “And the King, of course.”

Jaime took a seat, in the parlor of his uncle’s rooms at Dragonstone. “Of course.”

“Tell me, what is this ore all about?” Kevan inquired, taking out a pipe. He filled it and lit it, permeating the air with a faint spice.

“The presentation is tomorrow, uncle.”

Kevan looked up, eyes censorious. “And you have not bothered to find out beforehand? Your father would have known every detail within hours of landing.”

Jaime shifted. “I am not my father, uncle. As we all know.”

“No, you are not.”

Jaime looked away, flexing his hand. He wanted a sword in his grip, and an opponent facing him. That was the only time he ever felt complete.

_That, and when I’m with Cersei._

“Very well, then. Tell me of the Targayren girl. At least you’ve successfully ingrained yourself with her. Your father was pleased.”

_I didn’t do it for him. It wasn’t even my own doing._

Jaime had grown fond of her, so the question caused him to shift. He relaxed back, smirking arrogantly.
“She’s not the first girl to follow me around. She’s rather dull, to be honest.”

Kevan took a puff of his pipe. “When your father learned of Dorne’s actions with the bastard, he grew understandably…concerned.”

Jaime scoffed. “A bastard? How could that possibly worry a Lion? Whatever those savages are doing, no one here has any idea nor interest. Stannis Baratheon would never go against his brother, no matter his feelings. The man is so rigid and bound by ‘justice’ that he’d never be apart of any plots. As for the girl, she is barely nine, and content to marry the bastard. She has no ambition at all.”

Well…not for the crown, anyway. “If there’s something planned, they have no part in it.”

Jaime caught himself when he realized he’d strained, and begun to sound a bit too invested in the conversation. He immediately relaxed back, clearing his throat in what he hoped was a nonchalant manner.

Kevan puffed again, remaining silent. His back was always straight. “I’ve been hearing interesting stories, Jaime. You and the girl are apparently…close.”

Jaime looked at him, sardonic. “Uncle, I may not have women aplenty like my brother, but that doesn’t mean my tastes run towards little girls.”

Keven didn’t take either bait; if anything, he grew more serious. “If there is a plot, it will be against the crown, Jaime. The king, the queen, and their children. Your sister, nephews, and niece. One Kingsguard won’t have the power to save them.”

Jaime didn’t meet his eyes, but tension gathered in his muscles, despite his blasé pose.

“Take care, Jaime. If there is a plot, if someone has their eye on the remaining Dragons—be it their will or otherwise—then what occurred to the previous heirs and their mother will occur again. No one allows a threat to live, as your father should have taught you many times over by now.”

An image of Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen wrapped in black and red banners flashed in his mind, the maw of three dragons strained with blood. He pictured Cersei butchered like Elia Martell, murdered by a Dornish spear.

He felt sick.

Jaime didn’t reply, but lead slowly gathered in his stomach. “What does father want?”

Kevan smiled, but no amusement let his eyes. “Nothing too difficult, Jaime. Simply remain her…companion, and write to him with any interesting news, as you did about Oberyn Martell.”

It sounded too easy. To…merciful for Tywin Lannister. Jaime had never wished more that Daenerys Targaryen had kept her mouth shut about Oberyn Martell. “That’s is?” Jaime asked, voice tight.

“For now.”

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“What’s the matter with you?” Daenerys asked, squinting up at Jaime. The man jerked, looking down at her with a pale face.

“What?”

“You’ve been quiet the whole time? I have asked you three times about Lord Dondarrion, and each
time you just stare into the distance. Either he has a truly dreadful secret, or you’re preoccupied with other things.”

Jaime signed and leaned against the parapet. They’d been walking the walls of the Keep, for no reason besides the fact that Daenerys had never done so before. Justin accompanied them, but Tyene was still keeping her distance. Daenerys resolved to confront her about it.

“He is perhaps the most boring man I know, no secrets or ghosts that I know of. Honorable, forthright. Only Lord Stark could compete with him in honesty.”

Daenerys frowned. That was rather boring. “Why did you mention him, then?”

Jaime looked at him, perplex. “What? When?”

She signed, annoyed. “When I asked you about what you were thinking about, last time. You said ‘Bloody Beric Dondarrion.’”

He shot her a look, amused. “Don’t make a habit of swearing, little dragon. Or your dear guardian will have my head, and Ned Stark will probably help him, with how he’s been staring at me lately. You sure do work fast with your conquests.”

Daenerys squinted at him, confused. “‘Conquest’?”

He just snorted and moved on. Justin was smiling as well, both men seeming to know something she didn’t. She shot them both suspicious looks.

“And you’ve not even grown into your face yet. Your poor husband.”

Daenerys ran in front of him, halting his path and placing her hands on her hips, scowling up at him. “You are trying to distract me, Jaime Lannister!”

He muttered something that sounded like ‘seven hells.’ “Look, I simply have something on my mind.”

“And it’s bothering you. I can help. Tell me!” she demanded, halting him when he tried to move past.

Jaime turned to her, true anger in his eyes. She was startled. “Have you ever considered that some things are none of your business?” he bit out, acrid. “Not everyone has to indulge you, Daenerys Targaryen. Now move aside.”

She flinched, recoiling, hurt showing on her face. Jaime held his ground, sneering. There was genuine disgust in his eyes, and he’d never before looked at her like that. Her heart began to pound, and she felt hurt like he never had before.

Why are you being like this?

“Ser Jaime!” Justin protested, moving in. Daenerys halted him with a hand.

She glared up at Jaime, fire in her eyes. “I don’t know what has happened since yesterday, but I won’t let your evil mood ruin everything.” She raised her chin, sneering back at him. His lip twitched, but then he looked away, cursing.

I knew it was an act!

“I will find you tomorrow, after the meeting. If you persist to be so horrid…well, then I will kick you
in the shin and then return the next day. And if you continue after that, then I will kick you every day after, Jaime Lannister!”

With that declaration, she then proceeded to actually kick him, making him curse in shock as he instinctively reached down to his shin. Leaving him aghast, she walked away, nose high. Her heart still hurt, but she ignored it. She’d show him! Daenerys Targaryen was a dragon, and dragons didn’t give up!

Striding all the way back to her rooms, Daenerys resolved to do some terribly complicated pastime to take her mind away from Jaime and calm her anger. She didn’t know what yet, but she’d do it!

As she was nearing her rooms, she spied maester Cressen coming towards her. He smiled when he noticed. “Ah, there you are, my dear! A letter arrived for you!”

Daenerys’s heart began to pound, and she instantly forgot her anger as she sprang forward, smiling. “Really? So soon?”

He chuckled, and reached into his sleeve to take out a bulky package. She eyed it in surprise; it was much larger than normal.

Cressen handed it over with a gentle pat on her hand, and meandered on. “I will prepare the raven for a return trip.”

She looked up, curious. “Where did it come from?”

“Castle Black, my dear.”

She blinked, perplexed. But his last letter said he was leaving the next day. This latter was nearly a week after it. Was something wrong?

“Thank you, maester Cressen!” she said hurriedly and scurried into her empty room. She sat before the lit fire, glad Tyene always kept it burning. She always felt happier before a flame—more confident.

With a breath, she opened the letter, and blinked to find another folded paper inside.

“Number two?” she read, perplexed, and then saw that the outer one was called ‘Number one’.

With a shrug, she began to read.

Dear Daenerys

We are still in Castle Black, and will leave in the morning for Eastwatch. I convinced Prince Oberyn to tell me of his location, or perhaps to commit to one, and you can send your next letter there. We will stay until we receive it. I’m sorry to have misguided you, but we uncovered new information that convinced us to stay an extra week. Nothing bad, I promise. I have not told you in detail, but during my stay, Castle Black’s Maester, Aemon, took an interest in me. He taught me many lessons about society, about people. We are all parts of a whole, he says, all individual links on a Maester’s chain, and useless without the others. Highborn, lowborn, and all in between have a place in the world, a role. However, some people can choose their own paths, as long as they acknowledge and understand what other people have chosen. Furthermore, he gave me—you—a tremendous gift, one that I cannot wait to share with you, when we have a more secure means.

I grew very fond of Maester Aemon during my stay. He is wise and kind—the type of man you can sit with for hours and speak about anything. He is a man who listens to you, who understands and
guides. He is what a maester should be. Maester Aemon is also the oldest man I have ever met. He has lived through four generations since his birth, from the time of our grandfather’s father. He has seen so much of the world, has so many stories to tell. However, now he is a frail man, and his eyes have long ago failed him. His skin is like parchment, and his hair only a reedy thing.

Daenerys frowned. She was interested, but perplexed about why Jon was being so descriptive.

I have probably confused you at this point. I just wanted to say that he is a man that wanted to act, but duty and circumstances kept prevented him. That does not make his heart any less true, nor his sorry any less powerful. He is my present to you, Daenerys, one I hope will bring you joy, rather than pain.

Read the second letter, and remain well.

Yours,

Jon Snow.

Her hands were sweating, but she didn’t know why. She set down the first letter, hands shaking, and picked up the second, she stared at it, feeling as if it were much heavier than it should be. But the weight was in her mind, rather than in the paper.

She broke the unmarked seal.

My dearest niece,

Daenerys took a sobbing breath, almost unable to believe the words.

In another lifetime, I was Aemon of House Targaryen, a young dragon who chose the chain over the throne. I have lived a long life, full of much happiness, and many and more regrets. Nearly a decade and a half past, I wrote to another young Dragon, your brother, Rhaegar, and together we shared thoughts, worries, and speculations. It was my greatest pleasure to give him counsel, but I fear that my words may have set him on a treacherous path. For this reason, I have been ashamed, and too fearful to write you a missive.

Young Jon Snow spent hours with me, convincing me to gather my strength, one last time, and write you this missive. Well, to dictate this missive, for my eyes are now useless, and another must always read to me. Because of this, I fear I cannot be the receptacle of your private fears, for your words can never be for my eyes alone. This, too, was a reason for my hesitance. He is a good boy, my dearest blood. He will grow into a man worthy of any dragon: a man worthy of protecting your heart.

I hope you can find it in you to forgive a foolish old man who was too plagued by regrets to write you. A man too old and bound by duty to come when they took you, or to come to you now. Nevertheless, you have never been far from my thoughts, from my hopes. It is my dearest wish that you find happiness, in whatever way you can.

Write to me, even if in condemnation. I have been alone for many years, nearly all my blood long gone, and any words would now bring me comfort. But as long as you live, I can rest easy. It is a selfish wish, I know, and one I do not deserve. Nevertheless, it is what is in my heart.

You are ever in my prayers, dearest one.

With love,
Maester Aemon.

Her tears fell upon the letter and blurring the words. She clutched it close, shaking.

Aemon. Aemon Targaryen. Uncle Aemon, who lives in the north, who I will one-day visit, and touch, and sit with for hours to discuss my fears, my worries, my dreams.

She let out a sob, so shaken and happy and devastated that she could barely breathe.

I'm not alone.
Chapter Summary

A taste of freedom, a showcase of metal, a letter to family, and a destination of travel.

After her mother had left Winterfell, Sansa Stark had spent her first few weeks bitter about her lot in life, about how she’d lost both her mother and her septa, and been left in the hands of some strange woman, who didn’t share her mother’s beauty, and who didn’t know anything about the south! Jonelle Cerwyn was not Sansa’s idea of a proper lady, and she didn’t know the proper etiquette, was only possible at needlepoint, and didn’t know any southern dances. Worst of all, she hadn’t any stories of knights and their valor!

Those first days, steeped in anger, Sansa remembered her Septa’s words that this was all Jon’s fault! Sansa blamed him for her misery, blamed him for running her family. She’d been glad he at least was gone. Catelyn had always warned Sansa to keep her distance, to mind her place and Jon’s place, to always be aware that she was a lady, and thus higher than almost everyone around her. One day, Sansa would be the wife of a lord, and all her dreams of love and happiness would come true. Her sons would be valiant knights, and her daughters perfect ladies. This is what her mother and septa always told her, and Sansa obeyed them naturally.

Being a lady was her place, the seven-year-old knew: she loved embroidery, loved music and poetry, was naturally soft-spoken and feminine. Sansa was born to be a lady, and she’d make her mother and father proud of her.

So, it came as a surprise to her, that second month after she’d cried all her tears away, after she’d grown tired of anger and bitterness, to realize that…she felt rather freer without her mother and septa around. At first, the thought had filled her with shame, and she’d gone often to the sept and the weirwood to ask forgiveness for her uncharitable thoughts.

Unlike her septa, Jonelle wasn’t constantly reminding her what she ‘should’ be doing. Unlike her mother, Jonelle wasn’t constantly chiding her for her brief moments of ‘unladylike’ behavior. One time, when her father caught her running down the halls, for no reason than she’d simply desired to, he hadn’t scolded her like she’d expected—he’d only patted her head with a fond smile and gone on her way. Sansa had realized that her father didn’t care if she was the perfect lady, that he’d love her anyway…that that freed much of the weight on her shoulders.

Sansa still loved ladylike activities, embroidery was still her favorite thing to do, and she still missed her mother dearly, but she found that she rather enjoyed other things as well. When Robb invited her to go riding with him, Jonelle didn’t force her to sit perfectly straight. She didn’t have to keep a slow, ‘lady-like’ pace. When Robb challenged her to races, Jonelle didn’t send her quelling looks and reminders that ‘ladies were not competitive’ or ‘ladies did not horse-race’. Sansa found she loved riding fast and would laugh happily when racing against her brother and Theon. And no one rebuked her!

Sansa felt…happier than she had before, and that made her guilty. She was disobeying her mother’s wishes, disobeying her faith…but no one seemed to mind! No one told her to stop, or reprimanded her for running, and laughing aloud, and arguing with her brother. In fact, Jonelle encouraged her more open nature, and Robb enjoyed when they raced. Brother and sister grew closer than ever.
before, now that they had a shared interest.

Her best friend, Jayne Poole, and her other friend, Beth Cassel, hesitated at first when Sansa began to change, but soon they, too, lost their former rigidity. The girls would laugh more loudly and run around more, now that the Septa wasn’t constant chastising them for it. Soon, they played games and did things together beyond needlepoint and poetry. Often, they even invited the other children of Winterfell—like the maid’s daughter or the stable master’s daughter—to participate; something Sansa had never before considered. She’d been raised with the idea that ‘a Lady only kept company with those near her station’. But no one ever said the words to her anymore, no one cared when she ran and played with all the different children. No one told her that she had no place making friends with them.

Slowly, Sansa Stark let go of her bitterness, and the rigid expectations of what her ‘place’ in the world should be. She even sent a silent apology to Jon, the brother she’d loved to chase after, before she’d been told that he was wicked and greedy. Sansa didn’t remember him being like that…Jon was always just kind of sad.

The revelation of what she was now allowed to do made her braver than she’d been before. Four months after her mother had left, she’d gathered her courage and found her father in the weirwood. At first, no words were spoken, but as time passed, Sansa hesitantly began telling him of her day, of what she enjoyed and what she didn’t, of the friends she made. At first, she felt silly: her father was a great Lord, and he probably didn’t have any interest in her trivial childhood stories. However, Ned Stark was always patient and kind with her, and eventually, she’d dared to tell him how much she enjoyed riding fast and arguing with Robb. Contrary to her expectations, he didn’t disapprove, nor order her to cease this unladylike behavior. In fact, he actually gave her advice on better ways to ride so that she could get more speed! His only request was that she be careful, for riding was dangerous.

Sansa has hugged him that day, boldly, and finally relaxed completely in her intimidating father’s presence. She’d felt closer to Ned than ever before.

Still, while Sansa came into her own more and more, she continued to have dreams of knights and the valor of the south. Her father didn’t enjoy songs or host tourneys, so Sansa could only dream of these things. Jonelle cautioned her to be wary of high expectations, but Sansa ignored that. Jonelle was a northern lady; she didn’t understand the south!

So, when her father informed her that she and Robb would be staying at Riverrun with their mother for a few months, she’d been ecstatic! Sansa couldn’t wait to see her beloved mother, sister, and brother, and to finally experience the south! She’d spent the whole week prior to their departure dreaming of finding her true love, giggling with Jayne and Beth about it.

Those first days at Riverrun had seemed like a dream. She’d finally gotten her mother back, even though Catleyn was often distracted by her thoughts. She’d seen Arya and Bran, delighted over how much they’d grown. She’d met her grandfather, who praised her and gave her sweets. Most of all, she’d gotten to feast at Riverrun’s great hall, dressed in a beautiful gown, amongst music and laughter and a brightness that was absent at Winterfell. Even the food was different and exotic, with spices and meats she’d never seen before!

She’d toured the castle, dazzled by all the knights, by how courteous they were to her, how strong and valiant. She’d loved her beautiful, airy room, and the view of the river lands outside of her window. Riverrun was richer than Winterfell, and there was a different atmosphere. Sansa felt as if all her childhood dreams were coming true!

Even Arya’s perpetual bad mood couldn’t dim her spirit, although it did make her have less than charitable thoughts about her younger sister. She’d lived in this wonderful place for months, but
showed no appreciation for it! Sansa thought Arya was rather stupid.

However, after a couple of weeks at Riverrun, Sansa began to feel…weighed down.

“Can I go riding with Robb?” she asked septa Mordane quietly, staring out at the greenery beyond her window. Sansa and Arya had been sitting here for hours now, listening to the septa read The Seven Pointed Start while working on their stitches. At first, Sansa had diligently obeyed her Septa’s instructions, and been delighted by her praise, but now she was rather tired. Beside her, Arya swung her legs in agitation, something that had annoyed Sansa hours before, but now she understood. Sansa too wished to get up and do something.

She hasn’t been allowed to run, or play, or ride in over a week. The first time her septa had caught her laughing aloud or racing her brother, the older woman had nearly fainted. Sansa had spent the next hour being reprimanded for the behaviour, until only shame remained. Sansa slowly began to feel a horrible tension gathering in her muscles. It was familiar.

“My lady, we still have many lessons to finish today,” Mordane smiled gently. “Your stitches are wonderful for your age, but you can, of course, do better. Lady Arya has a long way to go if she ever hopes to catch up to you.”

Arya shot Sansa an annoyed look, and Sansa felt simultaneously proud at the praise, and uncomfortable at the comparison.

“Because a lord will really care about how straight a line is,” Arya muttered beside her, gripping her cloth and needle so hard her fingers were white.

“Lady Arya, mind your manners! Sarcasm does not become a lady,” Mordane chided sharply. Sansa flinched, at once looking away. She hated that scolding tone, even if it was not directed at her.

“I don’t want to be a lady!” Arya screeched, and shot out of her chair. In a burst of anger, she threw her needlepoint at the septa, who shrieked. Arya stood there, her tiny face red and screwed up in anger, panting. “It’s stupid! You’re stupid!”

“Arya,” Sansa said, desperately. She was making the septa angry!

Arya shot her a look of such venom, that Sansa actually recoiled. “I hate it here! Why couldn’t father have forced you to come! You like this horrible place!”

“Lady Arya!” Septa Mordane stood. “Sit back down at once!”

“No!” Arya yelled, and turned to run away, ignoring the septa calling for her.

Sansa sat there, stunned, staring after her. Despite multiple past tantrums, it was the first time Arya had actually left.

Anger gathered in her gut. How could Arya abandon her like this?

She tried to deny how jealous she was that Arya had the courage to do so. Didn’t she understand that it was pointless? This is what they had to do; everyone said so. Arya just wasn’t trying hard enough.

Why don’t I believe that anymore?

“That disobedient girl! She’ll never become a proper lady at this point! Why, the shame of it!” Septa Mordane muttered, shaking her head. “It’s that unruly northern blood!”
“If she doesn’t want to,” Sansa began, hesitantly, despite her earlier thoughts. “Why not just...leave her alone?” Sansa liked all these activities (although doing them for so long was making her like them a little bit less every day) but if Arya didn’t, then why force her?

Septa Mordane shot her a reproving look, and Sansa ducked, blushing. “My Lady, you are young and do not understand the order of the world. The gods created roles for us all, and you have the privilege of being born a lady. One day you will marry well and give your husband many strong sons. It is your place in life.”

Sansa kept her head lowered, but her shoulders slumped, just a bit.

“Now, get back to work. I’ll speak to your mother later about Lady Arya’s behaviour. Thank the gods Lady Catelyn has at least one proper daughter.”

Sansa bit her tongue to halt the defensive words. Arya was her sister...but her mother’s wishes were clear. She had to obey.

Nevertheless, while Sansa sat there, stitching to the dreary words of the Seven Pointed Star, she wished she could go home.

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Stannis sat beside Myra at the head table of Dragonstone’s massive dining room. Davos stood behind him, and Cressen sat to his left. The large, rectangular room was designed to hold hundreds of bodies and usually filled with rows of dark wood tables. The dragon motifs were particularly striking in this room, with walls carved with the visage of dozens of dragons. At times, it seems like hundreds of eyes were staring at any visitors, judging their right to sit in the castle of the dragonlords. The Baratheon banners on the walls were almost an affront.

Today, the tables had been removed to make an empty space at the center of the room. The Dozens of lords, highborn, magisters, merchants, and knights sat on benches around the room, facing the middle, eagerly awaiting the promised exposition. Once again, the Essosi were at one side, and the Westerosi at the other, organized according to their geography. Stannis met eyes with Ned Stark, who sat at the head of the first bench to Stannis’s left. The Vale, the Riverlands, the Westlands, the Crownlands, and the Stormlands followed; lords and knights of various houses sitting side by side. At the very last bench were the houses of Dorne, and of particular interest to Stannis was Gerold Dayne, who sat beside the Lady Allyria Dayne. Stannis hadn’t been able to stop scanning them for any resemblance to Jon Snow. The dark hair on the woman matched, but little else that Stannis could see.

He turned his attention ahead, banishing the thought. There were other matters to attend to.

At the center of the room, they’d placed a row of anvils and various hammers. Men stood before each one, half of them facing one side of the room, and the other half the other. At their head was Tobho Mott, dressed in a rich red overcoat and golden undershirt. Stannis did not mind that the colors were not of House Baratheon, because Mott’s only allegiance was to his work. Trivial outer trapping here irrelevant.

_It didn’t stop Myra from dressing us in gold and green, however._

“My lords, standing before you is Tobho Mott, master smith, and the man responsible for this discovery.” Stannis nodded at the man, who bowed deeply to him.

Tobho straightened and began to walk around the room, meeting eyes with his viewers. “Nearly a
year ago, I came to Dragonstone after hearing whispers of this mysterious ore,” Mott began, “I am a man who seeks a challenge! Never satisfied until I have achieved perfection in my craft. I see many of you here who have purchased my work before.”

There were nods around the room, fewer on the Essosi side.

Tobho turned to a Westerland knight. “Tell me, Ser Broom, have you ever faced a problem with the shield I forged for you? Or you, lord Piper? Has the helm I crafted ever failed you?”

Both men shook their head. “’Tis the best shield I own, Mott,” Broom said, “worth every coin.”

Tobho bowed again, clapping loudly. “And yet, by this time tomorrow, both your shield and helm would be useless against one crafted from this.”

With a flourish, Mott took out a silver plate from his large pockets, raising it up high to allow the sunlight to reflect off the shining metal. All around the room, the other helpers raised identical circular disks, allowing the guests to get ample view of one. On the Essosi side, the whispers of translators were rampant.

“I have named it ‘Aluminum.’ It is a metal so complicated to smelt, that only I could uncover it’s secret. And in this land, only Lord Stannis Baratheon has the ore. Well,” he looked around, smiling. “Unless you are willing to sail into old Valyria.”

The room shifted, looking around. No sane man would enter the Doom-plagued lands of the anxiety Valyrian peninsula. Entire armies had disappeared after daring to venture into those lands, their commanders filled with greed for Valyrian riches. Stannis has even heard ridiculous whispers that Valyria was inhabited by the ghosts of ancient dragonlords and their massive mounts, just waiting for some fool to invade their lands.

“What is it?” a magister from Myr called out, and murmurs of agreement filled the room. Many people leaned forward, as if they could acquire the knowledge simply by increasing their proximity to the metal.

Stannis was impressed with Mott’s abilities to garner interest.

“He’s an expert at this,” Davos murmured from behind, echoing Stannis’s thoughts.

“‘What is it?’” Mott repeated, smile widening. “It is the future, friends.”

His words stirred the room, and Stannis noticed the glances exchanged. Some intrigued, some worried.

“As we all know, armor is made of steel, iron, and leather,” Mott continued. “Only the very rich can afford steel, which is scarce and complicated to craft, and the very poor have only leather. Iron is the staple in our world, is it not? Your armies, soldiers, and guards all use iron plates, chainmail, and helms. Not even a Lannister can outfit his whole army with steel, is that not correct, Lord Kevan?”

Kevan Lannister started back coldly, but didn’t disagree with the statement. There were mutters of agreement all around. Stannis had led men for years, and he’d done his research about who was outfitted with what, and most common armies were dressed in iron or leather armor. While the style of armor differed depending on location, one thing was clear: iron was the staple material. Even Tywin Lannister couldn’t outfit all his men is steel.

Nodding once, Tobho reached into his other pocked at took out another plate. All around, his assistants followed suit.
“In my left hand, I hold an iron plate, while in the other, I hold an aluminum plate. Earlier, we asked for ten strong men from various houses and cities to participate.” He nodded to the end of the room, where said men awaited, standing by the far wall. At the sudden attention, they tightened. “Come; test the metal on an anvil. Is that acceptable?” he asked, looking around.

It took a few minutes, but eventually, agreement was reached. The men came forward, all of whom showed their massive strength in their large arms and broad shoulders. Stannis leaned forward, waiting for the inevitable conclusion.

One by one, the men took the plates from Mott’s assistants. Surprise shown on most faces, and all shot Mott suspicious looks at the difference in weight.

“Tell us, what is it you feel?”

“This metal of yours is light,” a man from Norvos said, his dark skin highlighted by deep green silks. “Much lighter than the iron.”

“Aye,” a Northman from House Stark said. “Is this some trick?”

The other men nodded, making a show of holding up the disks and weighing them, showing how light the aluminum was in comparison. Stannis watched the surrounding lords carefully. Many looked confused, but a few, Kevan Lannister and Eddard Stark amongst them, had slow comprehension dawning.

Ned shot Stannis an inquiring look. The Lord of Dragonstone nodded, a barely perceptible smile on his face.

“Aluminum is half as light as Iron,” Mott revealed. “As for its strength…well.” He motioned to the anvils, encouraging. “Begin with the iron.”

One by one, the men hit the plates as hard as they could, muscles straining. The cavernous room resonated with the sound of metal striking metal. Mott’s apprentices took the disks and showed them around the room. Stannis saw the dents on each, roughly the size of a gold dragon.

“We all know the strength of Iron,” Mott said. “Now, as for aluminum…”

He motioned to the men, who repeated their action. The metal was barely dented. Stannis watched in amusement as disbelief bloomed on their faces. Mott’s grin was smug.

The room was completely silent as the plates were displayed around, the small dents on both compared closely. They were, in fact, larger than those on the Iron, but the difference was so small, it wasn’t relevant.

Lords, magisters, knights, and merchants got to their feet slowly, taking the metal in hand and weighing it themselves, almost in disbelief. Soon the room became filled with murmurs and speculations, and men when up to Mott one by one, asking for specification, for information, trying to uncover the secret of smelting. Some even took the plates in hand and tried their own hands at the anvils, convinced it must be a conspiracy. But soon they all realized the truth of it: aluminum was real.

Kevan Lannister kept his seat, his face frozen.

Stannis met eyes with Myra, whose pleasant mask was cracking beneath her delight. Stannis placed his hand over hers, squeezing gently. She turned her hand over and interwind their fingers, holding him gently for a few brief heartbeats. They kept eyes on one another, sharing their triumph.
Then they let go, looking back down at the great room, which was getting louder as more and more people realized the implications.

“Much lighter than Iron, yet just as strong!” Mott boomed, over the noise. “in a week’s time, we will hold a tourney! We have full armor prepared for men of all sizes. Bid your champions against one another; House against House, City against City, Westeros against Essos. Let’s see how iron fares against aluminum!”

A huge commotion began, excitement in the air. Stannis sighed. He’d wanted it to be over today, but they had convinced him that a tourney was a perfect way to showcase the metal, and there was nothing most men liked better than free entertainment.

His orderly home would have to suffer their presence for a while longer.

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Jon Arryn released a great sigh, watching the King rage, face red.

“Reconciled? Reconciled! Ned, that bloody fool!”

Personally, Jon Arryn was tired of Robert’s petty rages. While the Targaryen had committed great crimes against the realm, Daenerys had no part in those acts. She hadn’t even been born when her father was terrorizing the realm.

The Stark’s had suffered the most under Targaryen rule, yet Ned had made peace. He was a better man than most.

“Yes, your grace,” Lord Varyn simpered, lowering his head sadly. “She apparently apologized before all the realm. Or so my little birds tell me. And Lord Stark accepted.”

“How could he do this?” Robert snapped. “Has he forgotten everything the dragonspawn have done to us! Has he forgotten Lyanna! Ned Stark is a bloody soft fool.”

The small council kept silent. They’d been speaking of other matters before Robert had stormed in. For an instant, Arryn had been hopeful that maybe the young boy he’d helped raise was finally going to start taking an interest in the realm. That he was finally going to act like a king.

But his hopes had been dashed the moment Robert opened his mouth.

Arryn was…tired. Tired of the corruption of the capital, tired of Robert’s weakness, tired of constantly trying to fix everything while it all continued to fall apart around him. Some days he wanted to resign as Hand, and take his household back to the Vale. He wanted peace a quiet, not this job that was killing him more every day.

So while his king continued to act the fool and hate a child, Jon Arryn just sat there, silent, wishing for a different world.

*****

Dear Uncle Aemon,

Knowing you is the greatest gift I have ever been given. For many years, I have felt alone, even when surrounded by cousin Stannis and his family. I care deeply about them, and they treat me well, but there has been an emptiness inside me that I cannot explain. I do not care how you survived, only that you did. One day I will see you in person, and my words will be for your ears alone.
I do not know what letters you and Rhaegar exchanged, nor how they could have led to the Rebellion. But I won’t condemn you for it, even if I did. Rhaegar was a man grown, and his choices were his own. I have many thoughts about what he did, but they are for your ears alone. One day, we will talk.

Right now, I can’t think of what else to say. My heart will not stop beating long enough for my brain to work. All I know is that I am happy that you are alive. That I am not alone. Tell me of your life, uncle, so that I can remember you. Tell me of my ancestors, who are only pages in a book. Tell me of my House, which I both love and hate; which brings me both pride and shame.

Tell me your story, and I will tell you mine.

Your niece,

Daenerys.

Aemon sat before the fire, tears running down his cheeks, Jeor beside him. “She is a good girl, Lord Commander. Do you see?”

“Aye,” Jeor Mormont said, looking down at the words, bittersweet memories of his own family playing in his mind. “Aye, maester.”

“Do you think she will live? Do you think she will prosper?”

Jeor looked into the flames, giving Aemon his privacy. The truth was a complicated thing, but Aemon didn’t want the reality from him. The maester knew, better than most, what the world was like. He wanted reassurance from a friend, not bitter truths. “Aye, Aemon. She will.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw the old man give a watery smile. Jeor wondered what the future would bring.

*****

“The Trident?” Jon asked, mouth dropped open, “We’re sailing south, and then west into the Trident? Why?”

Oberyn sat in Eastwatch’s dining hall, feet up on the table, spearing pieces of pork with his knife. He placed a morsel in his mouth, chewing as he eyes Jon. “Do you have some moral objection to the Riverlands, broody boy?”

Jon refused to think about how Lady Catelyn, Arya, and Bran were currently at Riverrun. Surely Oberyn wouldn’t take them there. Jon had finally gotten away from her.

“Are we going to Riverrun?” he asked, point blank. Some things were too important to leave to chance.

Oberyn blinked, chewing slowly. “Ah, the Lady Catelyn. She was a Tully, yes? Rest assured, we’re not headed west. Too many Lannisters in that direction,” he spat.

Jon blinked. “Then…why?”

Oberyn took another bite. “Are you not curious about the other kingdoms? I rather like the idea of traveling though them. I spent more time in Essos than Westeros, and find myself curious. We can travel leisurely south. There will probably be a few tourneys along the way, as well.”
Jon hesitated. He wasn’t against the idea of travel. He’d probably enjoy it a lot more down south, without the constant threat of wildlings, or the possibility of freezing to death at night.

“Is that really all it is?” Jon asked, a bit suspicious. “Just a whim?”

Oberyn watched him, eyes alight with interest. He tilted his head, smirking. “Ah, what a change in you already. Where is the trusting young boy who I met at Winterfell?”

“I was never ‘trusting’,” Jon said, dryly. “You were just too good at being honest.”

Oberyn snorted, smile widening. “Your type humor will not make you popular, Jon Snow. It takes too much intellect to understand.”

“I don’t want to be popular,” Jon muttered, defensive.

Oberyn rolled his eyes, hearing the lie in the words.

“You didn’t answer me,” Jon accused, eyes narrowed. Oberyn never lied, but he was slippery with the truth.

Eventually, Oberyn sighed. “There are a few stops along the way that I must make,” he eventually conceded.

He said nothing more, but it was enough. Jon would pay careful attention to just where they ended up. He’d begun to comprehend that the Viper rarely did anything on a whim, although his erratic patterns made it seem as such. There as a method to his chaos.

“We will end up in Dorne, right?” Jon asked, sighing wearily.

Oberyn smirked, slowly. “Of course. Eventually.”

*****

Dear Jon,

I can’t tell you how much your gift means to me. I will never forget it. Already, I’ve sent a letter to Uncle Aemon, and I was so nervous through the whole thing! Do you think he will like me? I just don’t know how to feel. A part of me wants to go to cousin Stannis and demand he take me north right now, but I know I can’t. There are too many responsibilities at Dragonstone, and Myra wouldn’t let me go so far north without many men. It’s a huge hassle.

The ore meeting is still in progress. We are to host a tourney in two days, to showcase the ore. A part of me wishes you could make it. I’m sure Prince Oberyn would enjoy it. Tell him that the new metal is ‘half as heavy as Iron, but just as strong’. I’m not sure why it’s such a shocking thing, but everyone who has heard of it so far is amazed. I have little interest in war and battle, to be honest. Fighting just seems like a horrible waste of life.

Speak of which, did you make it to Eastwatch alright? You didn’t encounter any wildlings, did you? While I don’t think the Wall was built for them, I also know they’re a big problem in the North. Well, Prince Oberyn is a great fighter, so I’m sure you are alright either way. I hope it doesn’t take you too long to reach your next destination. The idea of traveling around is wonderful, but it sure does make it hard to write letters.

Write back soon,
Yours,

Daenerys.
Dear Daenerys,

Maester Aemon will come to see you for who you are. He is a kind man, a wise man. He spoke of you often, of how worried he was. Reassure him that Lord Stannis treats you well. The only thing I can say is that he enjoys having some to speak with, and I know you enjoy it as well. I think you would suit. And one day, you can meet him.

I have told Prince Oberyn about the ore. He even threw his head back and laughed, speaking coarsely about the Lannisters. Lord Stannis already has one customer, I think. In Westeros, much of the armor is made of iron. In my lord father’s household, the guards wear chainmail made from iron links. It’s very heavy and difficult to move in. This metal will allow the wearer more freedom. It’s the most important part of battle. The Prince has exhibited interest in the metal. He does not wear much armor, because it his method of fighting requires quick, unexpected movements. Lord Stannis will become very rich.

We made it to Eastwatch. I am hesitant to tell you the truth. You said you have no interest in fighting, but on the way here, we encountered Wildlings. A group of seven. Prince Oberyn…took care of five of them within minutes. But another one of them nearly hit him with an arrow. I stopped him. I nearly killed him. It makes me sick every time I think of it. I let them go after, with an oath to remain away. I hope I made the right choice.

We’re to sail south in the morning. Prince Oberyn had told me we’re going west into the Trident. I don’t know anything further than that, but I’ll send you a letter when we arrive at our destination. I’ll tell you, in detail, what it’s like. Although you probably know more about sailing than I.

Yours,

Jon
It was the first day of four planned for the tourney. First the Melee, then archery, third a game of individual combat from Essos, and then ending in a joust. Daenerys was excited; while they hosted tourneys all the time at King’s Landing, Myra never let her attend them. The king grew sour in her presence, and that in turn increased the strain for everyone. So while the sounds of music and merriment would fill the great courtyard before the castle, while the voices would raise high with laughter and song, Daenerys was forced to keep her distance. But not this time! This time she could join in with everyone, this time she could enjoy it!

Daenerys sat at her dressing table, watching her reflection in the concave, polished mirror at her dresses. The early dawn sun lit the room a glorious pink. It had been nearly a week since her last letter, but still no reply. If Maester Cressens estimations were correct, the raven should arrive sometime over the next week. She’d take careful note of everything that happened during the tourney, and share it with Jon.

“What does a squire do during a tourney?” she questioned, looking over her shoulder at Tyene. Her friend was laying out a dark pink dress, as close to red as they ever dared.

“Errands, mostly, m’lady. They will fetch drink or food, convey messages, or collect information. They care for their knight’s horse, clean and polish their mail, and help them into their armor. During tourneys, the squires are responsible for fetching fresh lances or a sword for combat.”

It sounded rather boring to her. “And then they become knights? Is that all you have to do?”

Tyene chuckled as she came up behind her and took a brush in hand. Dany turned her head to face the mirror, enjoying the motion of her sleep-mussed hair slowly being untangled. Tyene was really good at brushing, almost as if she’d done it before. But the maid had no siblings, so perhaps for her mother? Dany didn’t like to ask, because she thought Tyene would be sad to be reminded of her mother’s death.

“Not all squires become Knights. Some choose not to, some are not skilled enough. Knighthood is as political as any other position at times. Some men are knights simply because they can afford to be, or have a relative that has seen it done.”

“Jon will become a knight because he is skilled,” Daenerys said, positive. “Lord Stark tells me that he managed to get a hit on Prince Oberyn while at Winterfell. It’s a very impressive feat.”

The brushing jerked to a halt, just for an instant. “That is remarkable, m’lady,” Tyene replied, with an odd note to her voice. “No wonder the Prince took him as squire.”

Dany grinned, proud. Her betrothed was a very impressive person. The two girls giggled and chatted about the tourney, those who were participating, and the following feast. Tyene wove pink ribbons into Dany’s hair and pinned it up in intricate braids. Then she helped her charge into the dress. The silver princes turned around, pleased by the way the dress swished about her legs.

She smiled up at Tyene. “Well?”

Tyene shook her head, amused. She came closer and places a circuit of fine metal loops around Dany’s neck, completing the outfit. “Lovely as always, my princess. You will be the most beautiful in all the land.”

Dany grinned, pleased.

Tyene turned to set the room to rights, and Dany helped her by placing the ribbons back in their
chest. “What shall we do for today’s luncheon, m’lady? I was thinking it would be a lovely day for us to eat on the southern cliffs.”

The silver princess gazed out her window. The sky was clear, and would hopefully stay that way throughout the day. “That sounds perfect. I shall invite Jaime and Lord Stark.”

It’s past time those two talked. Their glowering is very annoying.

Tyene shot her a strange look, but then smiled.

“That sounds perfect, m’lady.”

*****

Ned Stark sat in the stands, amongst a grow of excited hightborn from two continents. The eastern cliffs of Dragonstone hosted a wide, flat, grass-covered plateau. Upon it two opposing rows of covered stands had been set up. The Lord’s stand was higher than the others, and facing the castle, and Ned sat to their left. On the opposing side, the Essosi had seated themselves according to their own social standing, with pockets of people surrounding powerful men from each region.

The wind was gentle despite the height, but the morning sun was too weak to alleviated the natural chill. He tilted his head back, enjoying the cold, and longing for Winterfell. Around him, men in heavier clothing than normal shivered. Ned pictured them in the frozen north during the heart of Winter, and shook his head in amusement.

He shot a look at the main stand, where Stannis and Myra were seated on the high chairs, four guards behind them. A level below them, Steffon and Daenerys were seated on either side of the Lord and Lady. A man he didn’t know stood behind Steffon, while Ser Justin stood behind Daenerys, having chosen to forgo the melee. Sitting on a cushion beside the princess, her blonde maid watched the sounding with a sweet naivety in her eyes. Stannis has told Ned the story of how she came to be in the princesses employment, and knew he would have similarly rewarded a woman who put her own life at risk to save one of his daughters. Just the thought of an assassin targeting Sansa or Arya chilled him.

Turning his attention back to the empty space between the stands, Ned sighed as he contemplated four days of this. The contests would break for luncheon before resuming, and then end prior to dinner, where the winner would be seated upon the high table in honor. Stannis had promised to outfit the personal guard of any House that won with full Aluminum plates, provided the tournament successfully exhibited its uses.

After all, tourneys were simply small-scale war exhibitions. The melee mimicked active infantry warfare. The archer contests were designed to put shooters under time pressure, such as in war. The Essosi single combat included was more due to their traditional fighting pits, but relevant all the same. And the joust exhibited the strength of the cavalry. Ned had no interest in war; he remembered all too well the chaos and death during the Rebellion, and saw these games as a bloody, unnecessary pastime. Besides, in the North, people were more focused on survival than trivialities.

The competitors were chosen from all houses, and outfitted at random either with the new armor, or with standard iron plates. Those with aluminum naturally had an unfair advantage, which was the entire point. Stannis had ensured that all the armor was free to be inspected prior to donning, to prove that there were no attempts to adulterate either metal. In total, the contenders were Knights or personal guards from Westeros and Essos, and a total of 600 men would be competing, with a representative from nearly every House and Magister. Just over two-thirds of those were participating in the melee, Ned noted, as men walked out from the large tents set up at one end of the cliff. He
estimated about 400 men.

The crowd released a rousing cheer.

“Greetings, my Lord.” A man seated before him said. Ned glanced down, noting the sigil of House Arryn on his tunic.

“To you as well, Ser…?” he replied.

“Ser Vardis of House Egen, my Lord. Captain of the household guard at the Eyrie. My Lord Arryn is at King’s Landing, and thus he instructed me to participate in the meeting on behalf of our House.”

Ned scrutinized the man more carefully. Then he slowly pieced together where he’d seen him before: at Jon Arryn’s side during his childhood at the Eyrie. “Ser Vardis. Your pardon, it has been years.”

“Think nothing of it, my Lord.”

Down below, the men lined up, blunt weapons in hand. Stannis has ordered no deaths in this tourney, on pain of disqualification of all competitors from the responsible party, and everyone had agreed with the edict. Few wanted to lose loyal men. The competitors bowed before Lord Stannis, and then before their own Houses and Magisters.

“How are you finding the meeting so far? I have written to Lord Arryn, who finds himself very interested in the ore.”

“It has the potential to change much,” Ned responded simply. Over the past week, the rookery had seen a rush of activity. Stannis had been busy with constant meetings between interested parties, but there was still an air of skepticism amongst most. A change of this magnitude was daunting.

“They will purchase it,” Stannis declared, no hint of doubt in his voice. The men sat at dinner, speaking of the ore while Daenerys and Steffon argued over the last pastry. Myra remained politely attentive, but Ned had slowly gotten to understand that talk of business was not a part of her interests. “Even if only to ensure their enemies can’t suddenly change the balance of power.”

Daenerys looked up, distracted from her goal, and Steffon stuffed the whole pastry in his mouth. Myra shot him and chiding look, but he only smiled cheekily in return. “So, people buy things just because other people do? Even if they don’t really want it?”

“Yes,” Stannis said, not bothered by her curiosity. Ned had gotten to understand the dynamics of this family. Daenerys was never told that war, or wears, or even ruling was not her place. She learned whatever she wished, and Stannis didn’t mind society’s restrictions.

“Is that why Valyrian Steel is so expensive? Jaime tells me that Lord Lannister has been looking to purchase a sword for years, with no success.”

Stannis nodded, “Valyrian Steel is the greatest metal to ever exist. In a battle, no other weapon can compete.”

Daenerys grew contemplative, eyes calculating. “Just like dragons,” she murmured, and Ned felt a chill. Then, she noticed that Steffon had stolen her pastry, and began to berate her smug cousin.

“That it does, my lord,” Ser Vardis responded, and for a moment, Ned had no idea what they’d been speaking of. “Lord Arryn desired to travel and see the tourney for himself, but his Grace forbid it.”

Ned pondered why Robert would give up an opportunity to see a tourney. Then decided it was
probably because Stannis was hosting it.

Before Ned could respond, Stannis stood from his place, and walked to the edge of the stand, back straight. The crowd gradually quieted. His face revealed nothing, and he held his hands together at the small of his back. The lord of Dragonstone was dressed in his House Colors, most likely the influence of his wife, as Stannis preferred black and brown leathers and tunics.

Daenerys leaned down to chatter excitedly with her maid, a bright smile on her face. Ned believed this was no place for such a young girl, but Stannis had dismissed his concerns.

If she finds herself uncomfortable, she will leave. Otherwise, she’d just find other ways to watch, and I could not keep my eye upon her. Ned wondered if Sansa or Arya would enjoy watching a tourney. Ned knew that he, personally, did not.

The last one he’d attended had been Harrenhall, the source of everything. The green boy he’d been had been awed, but now, as a man grown, there were too many memories of Lyanna. He could almost see her ghost seated beside him, avidly watching the proceedings. She, like Daenerys, loved every moment of this.

“Herald,” Stannis nodded. A man below the stand stepped forwards. Gathered before the stands, separated from the competitors by a tall wooden fence, a huge crowd from the remaining houses and smallfolk of Dragonstone were present. They were easily five times the size of the combatants, and packed together tightly in the allotted space around the field.

“Welcome to the Tourney at Dragonstone, my Lords, my Ladies, Sers, Magisters, and honorable merchants!” the man boomed, his voice carrying over the crowd. A cheer went up, the excitement decreasing the normal formality of the highborn, the restraint of the small folk. “For four days, we will pit champions against one another, showcasing their might, and the wonders of aluminum! Today we begin with a melee! The rules are simple: a free-for-all battle. Anything but death and permanent dismemberment is fair game! Alliances are welcome! Strategy is encouraged! And by the gods, make it entertaining!”

A rousing cheer in the crowd, the adrenaline pumping high. The combatants raised their weapons and roared in challenge.

“Of the competitors present, only the forty remaining will advance to the single combat battles held on the morrow. The remaining are disqualified from any other game. All who wish to walk away, do so now!”

A brief hesitation as men looked around, but in the end, no one left. Ned sat back. That meant there would be relatively few men in the archery competition and the jousts. Thankfully, they wouldn’t have to spend the whole day at this.

“This is a game of endurance! No food, drink, or rest. Any who leave the field forfeit. Any who fall unconscious forfeit. The battle will last until only the winners remain; all day and night if needed!”

A bloodthirsty cheer from the crowd, who were eager to watch men clash with men.

“My Lord?” The herald signaled.

Stannis raised his arm, and in one brutal movement, swung it down.

The game began.

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Daenerys winced when another man was felled, his blood dripping from a broken nose. The crowd roared as his opponent raided his hammer high, letting out a triumphant cry before immediately turning to another opponent. Soon, members of Dragonstone’s guard entered the melee and dragged his unconscious form away.

It had been going on for three hours now, with over half of the competitors gone. Most of those defeated, she noted, wore iron armor. They were differentiated by the red mark pained into their chest plate, as posed to the blue mark on the aluminum plates.

All around, men and women were paying more attention to their own conversations than to the battle. She wondered what plans and alliances were being made and broken on these stands. She glanced at Jaime, seated to their right amongst families from the Westerlands, leaning forward to watch the fight with interest. Lord Kevan Lannister and his wife had left after the first hour, the man’s face stony. Lord Stark was to their left, close enough that she could speak with him if she leaned over the rail. He was in conversation with a man near him, looking tired. He certainly didn’t enjoy this.

In their own stand, Myra was reading a book, occasionally glancing up to sigh as one man or another was defeated, before looking away. She had neither interest nor patience in such a thing. Myra was the most comfortable in a crowd, where she could sway minds to her opinion, without even clear stating said opinion. Beside her, Stannis was rigidly watching the melee, face cold and calculating, but occasionally, Dany saw him glance at Myra’s book with longing. However, as lord, he believed he must watch until the end.

She noted Ser Justin avidly watching the battle, winching in sympathy after a particularly bad hit, and cheering quickly after a triumph. He was rooting for the crownland houses, particularly a knight from House Massey. At her side, seated comfortably amongst some pillows, Tyene was stitching serenely. She didn’t seem at all interested in the happenings, nor bothered by them. King’s Landing must be a dangerous place for the lowborn, if such violence wasn’t shocking.

Beside her, Steffon was cheering on his favorites, who he chose simply due to how many men they defeated. Daenerys had been entertained by the premise, but soon the onset of blood, bile, and occasionally vomit just served to turn her stomach.

“Ser Dayne defeated another competitor!” Steffon said excitedly. “Dany, he’s going to win, I know it.”

She looked to the eastern side of the field, where a man in iron armor was moving like lightning. He kept to the edge and fought any man who got close. The ground behind him was littered with weapons, like trophies of war.

“It’s early yet, Steffon,” she responded, but couldn’t deny the awe she felt watching him fight. “And he’s in iron. Most of the remaining competitors are in aluminum. Surely he’ll tire soon.”

“Ser Dayne is playing the game well,” Stannis said, garnering attention. “He’s keeping behind groups of men from Dorne, most of whom won’t target him due to loyalty. The men that manage to get to him are tired, and usually alone. Also, he doesn’t seek battle, but waits for them. It gives him time to rest between fights. He’s aware of the disadvantage of his armor.”

She looked more closely at the battle, noticing everything Stannis said. “And unlike most of those who remain in the middle, he doesn’t have to worry about men attacking from the back,” she noted, looked up at Stannis.

Myra looked up briefly, smiling. Stannis nodded, faint approval in his eyes. “Yes. Strategy is the
backbone of war.”

Dany looked at the seeming chaos with new eyes, slowly starting to see patterns. The men with the most victories were in strategic positions, usually at the edges. They stayed in their conquered territories, patient, while those most at risk were usually found in the middle, and quickly felled. The only successful men in the middle were those that moved in coordinated groups, and even they didn’t look for battle, but waited for it to approach them. Their stances protected each other from surprises. She noted that these latter groups were usually made of Essosi competitors.

“They either have a team, or amazing skill,” she noted. “The winners, that is.”

“Numbers or advantages,” Stannis said. “That’s what wins wars.”

Looking down at the quickly declining number of red-marked men, she began to understand just how important this new metal really was.

Steffon ignored their talk of strategy. The young boy preferred to just watch and cheer for his arbitrarily chosen favorites. When he’d first asked to watch, Myra had been reluctant. He was young yet. However, cousin Stannis allowed it. Daenerys caught him watching Steffon carefully for signs of discomfort. But her young cousin was treating it as a marvelous game, despite the constant violence. She wondered if he was aware of how hurt some of the competitors were.

The next two hours passed slowly, and the field whittled down to just over a hundred. She was growing bored again; fighting got boring after a while, and she didn’t particularly care who won. While the strategic side was interesting, she didn’t like the pointless bloodshed. She wondered if Jon would be interested in this. If he liked violence of this sort. She didn’t know what to feel about that.

She turned to look at Stannis, who was looking so miserable, his cool face was beginning to crack. Dany was sure that in his mind right now, he was contemplating all of the work he could be doing, rather than sitting here playing host. “Cousin, I think I’ll retire for lunch.”

He nodded.

Myra looked up from her book. “It is getting rather late. Come, Steffon, we should have something as well.”

“Oh mother, please!” he begged. “They’re almost done. I don’t want to miss anything!”

“Steffon,” she repeated, once, and he slumped.

“Why don’t you order something from the kitchens and eat here?” Stannis suggested. “I’m hungry as well.”

Myra hesitated, looking between son and husband, and then sighed. “Very well. But only for today. Tomorrow we eat inside, understood?”

Steffon nodded, smile huge.

Dany stood. “Well, I’m tired of all this. We’re having luncheon on the southern cliffs.” Smiling, she looked down at Tyene, who took that as her cue to rise. “I’ll fetch the basket from the kitchen’s m’lady, and meet you there. Shall I send one for you as well, Lady Myra?”

Myra smiled and nodded.

Dany shook her head. “I’ll just come with you. We’re headed to the same place.”
Tyene hesitated briefly, but smiled. “M’lady, didn’t you plan to invite Lord Stark and Ser Lannister? I will prepare the food while you do so.”

Stannis muttered, “Both of them? Seven hells.”

Myra glanced at him reproachfully, but he kept eyes on the melee.

Dany squinted at Tyene. “Inviting them will only take a moment, and then—”

“We cannot have them in the kitchens,” Tyene said firmly. “Is that not correct, m’lady?” she asked Myra.

The Lady of Dragonstone was watching Tyene carefully, but nodded slowly. She smiled at Daenerys. “My love, the kitchens are no place for your guests.”

Daenerys frowned, but slowly agreed. She supposed the cook would be annoyed to have two large men taking up space.

Satisfied, Tyene took her leave.

Daenerys waited several minutes before getting up. She instructed Justin to ask Jaime, and went herself to Lord Stark.

Upon seeing her, he and his companion ceased their conversation. They all stood. She ignored the looks of distrust she was getting from the men and women around him, and smiled at them all. She curtseyed to Ned, “My Lord.”

He bowed in return. “My Lady.”

“Would you like to join me for luncheon, my lord? My maid is preparing a meal.”

Ned hesitated, and looked behind her, presumably toward Stannis. “Will your guardian be joining us, My lady?”

She shook her head. “Lord Stannis must stay until the end. I was hoping you could tell me more of my betrothed.”

Away from Stannis, so that I can ask more interesting questions.

Ned paused for a moment, looking around him as the suspicious faces, and she thought he’d reject the invite. But then he nodded.

“Aye, then.”

He nodded to his companions, many of whom looked surprised, and followed her down the stands. At the base, she took his arm and they made their way towards the castle. She ignored the interested whispers that marked their passing, aware that most people would be questioning how their families could truly reconcile.

But Daenerys knew that Lord Stark was one of the best men she’d ever met, and cursed again that she’d been so shaken over Uncle Aemon’s letter that she’d completely forgotten to mention his presence to Jon.

“Do you think Jon would enjoy this?” she asked, nodding to the fighting.

Ned contemplated the answer. “It’s difficult to say, my lady. He enjoys sparring, but that doesn’t
mean one enjoys blood.”

She looked ahead, thinking. That didn’t really answer her question, but it did answer a different one. “But do you think he would?”

Ned paused, and looked back at the fighting, as if paying attention for the first time. At that moment, a man she glanced at was kicked to the ground, blood coughing from his mouth. She looked away.

“I don’t know,” Ned Stark finally said, a remote quality to his voice.

They continued on, and she shot him looks, noting the brooding look on his face. She wondered what thoughts could be so heavy.

“He’s traveling to Eastwatch by the Sea, now,” she informed him, wondering if he knew. Ned looked at her, attentive. “They should be there by now, I believe.”

“Eastwatch,” Ned murmured. “Do you know where they’re headed after that?”

She shook her head. “It’s possible Jon doesn’t, either. Prince Oberyn seems to travel where the mood strikes him.”

He chuckled as they made their way past the stands, slowly getting further from the noise.

She furrowed her brow at a sudden thought. “Can ravens travel across the Narrow Sea?”

Ned looked startled, as if he’d never contemplated that Oberyn may take Jon that far away. “No,” he murmured. “A courier would be needed.”

Where am I to find a courier? She’d have to ask cousin Stannis. Traveling was rather annoying. She hoped he’d be in Dorne soon, so they could talk more. Or maybe they’d arrive at Dragonstone! She knew Prince Doran had sent a representative for House Martell, but perhaps Prince Oberyn would wish to see the ore for himself?

Excited by the prospect, she contemplated what it would be like to meet him as they walked.

Soon they finally were behind the stands, on the path back towards the castle. She spotted a rock formation up ahead, where they’d turn towards the southern cliffs. She paused in place, looking behind to wait for Ser Justin. Ned paused as well, surprised.

“Is there someone joining us, my lady?” there was a peculiar quality to his voice.

Before she could respond, Ser Justin and Jaime rounded the stand. The latter’s long golden hair was free today, and tussled by the wind. He was in full Kingsguard armor, as he usually was in public.

At her side, Ned stiffened, and she glanced up, surprised by the ice in his eyes. She glanced at the two men, wondering against at what exactly had occurred between them. She recalled from one of Jon’s letters that Lord Stark thought Jaime an oathbreaker, who should have been sent to the Wall. He didn’t know about the wildfire, she guessed.

“Lord Stark,” Jaime smiled, although it was one of his mean ones, she noted, exasperated.


There was a moment of silence as the men stared at each other, a hidden history between them. After a few moments, Daenerys began to walk, and they followed in silence. She began to regret this outing, just a bit. She honestly didn’t want to make them both this uncomfortable. No one spoke until
they were far from the commotion, and walking down the barren path to the southern cliffs. The wind was gentle around them, and the castle an imposing sight to their right.

“It’s been a long time since we met, my lord,” Jaime began.

“Aye.”

More silence. Daenerys glanced at them, and then met eyes with Ser Justin, who was looking similarity uncomfortable.

“At King’s Landing, when Daenerys was betrothed to your…son.”

She shot Jaime an annoyed look. He ignored it.

“Aye,” the Lord of Winterfell responded, voice just a bit harder.

“You came and left in such a hurry.”

“There were things requiring my attention,” Ned muttered, not looking at Jaime. But the latter seemed determined to get something.

“Of course, we didn’t speak, then. It seems you’re unable to do so, even now.”

“The last time we spoke, Lannister, is when you sword was stained with the blood of your king,” Ned snapped, impatience in his tone.

Daenerys felt the words like a blow, and halted in place. The men jerked to a stop, and Ned looked at her as if suddenly realizing she was still there. Something like shame came over him.

But Jaime straightened, defiant. “Don’t act the saint, Stark. You were coming to kill him yourself.”

“Silence. Not in front of—”

“No,” Daenerys interrupted. She took a breath and held her chin high. “I know what my father was. I want to know. I want to hear what happened.”

Both of them stared at her, but she clenched her jaw and looked at them in challenge. Jaime told her that Ned Stark was one of the first people to find him after…after he’d earned the title Kingslayer.

“You heard her,” Jaime challenged. “I’ve seen the way you look at me, Stark. You were coming to kill him yourself.”

“Silence. Not in front of—”

For a moment, emotions wared on Ned’s face, and Daenerys waited. She knew that he didn’t want to speak before her, that his honor compelled him to keep these tales away. But that very same honor was why he desired to speak. He didn’t approve of her friendship with Jaime, and he’d been burdened by his every time he saw them together.

“You stabbed him in the back, and sat upon the throne,” Ned finally said, and the words were calmer than she’d expected. “You should be at the Wall, oathbreaker.”

Daenerys couldn’t help but picture the scene. The glance Jaime shot her had a spark of shame. She stared at him, squaring her shoulders. She would hear everything. Only when all the facts were presented would she make her verdict.

Ned Stark was the only one who could tell her the truth of those events, and finally halt the whispers of distrust in her mind of Jaime’s account of events.
He turned back to Ned, and the two made a point of pretending they were alone. She backed up a bit, her hands clenched together before her.

“Tell me, had I stabbed him in the stomach, would you reward me instead?” Jaime sneered. “I was there, when he burned your father, killed your brother. Countless others. It was justice.”

She felt sick, but stood her ground. *I knew he was a monster. I knew it. Stop hurting whenever someone just confirms it further!*

*I am a dragon. Words are nothing but air, and dragons are masters of the sky.*

Ned stared at him, face hard. “Justice? Is that what you tell lady Daenerys, so that she can absolve you of your sins? You only acted after it was safe to do so, Lannister. When he was weak, and your father could protect you. All of his crimes, and you just stood there. When my father burned, you just stood there.”

Jaime clenched his fists, and glanced at Daenerys, a horrible guilt in his eyes. But then he sneered at Ned. “Hundreds of people stood there. Hundreds. And not one spoke up. They never spoke up, all the knights of the realm!”

“And that absolves you? They tarnished their honor, so you could as well?” Ned shook his head. “It wasn’t justice that drove you, Kingslayer; or you’d have acted before. No, you wanted glory.”

“I didn’t—” Jaime bit the words off. Then he gave a bitter laugh. “Forget it. How could a man like you understand?”

He turned and strode further along the path, back shaking in rage.

Daenerys made her way forward and quickly took lord Stark’s arm. She pulled him gently along with her, following after Jaime. He would probably return to the castle after this, and the southern entrance was closest.

“That was not a conversation for your ears, my lady. I have shamed myself,” Lord Stark sighed, his shoulders lowered. He always looked so tired, the poor man. Suddenly, Daenerys understood him a bit better. He only wished to see the ‘good’ people. But everyone was both good and bad, but perhaps lord Stark had never learned that lesson.

*Is Jon like you?*

A completely good person was only a myth. She valued that he tried to live up to the idea, however, when most just proclaimed but didn’t uphold their ideals.

“My Lord, you should talk with people more. I think it would help. Cousin Stannis is the same,” she affirmed, faintly exasperated. “Myra says it’s because he is too often in his own head.”

Ned halted, staring at her in faint shock. It was not everyday a great lord was reprimanded by a child. She shook her head at him, ignoring the quelling looks Ser Justin was sending her.

“My Lady,” Ned said, faint disapproval in his tone.

She tugged on Ned’s arm, prodding him to follow her. “Many months ago, cousin Stannis sent dozens of men into the sewers of King’s Landing.”

He halted whatever he’d been about to say, and blinked at her. Confusion furrowed his brow.
“They searched everywhere, under the streets, the gates, the castle, the Sept of Baelor, and the Dragonpit. They found nothing.” They continued on, and saw that Jaime had paused ahead, and was seated on a flat rock, slumped over. Daenerys believed that he wanted absolution from Lord Stark; Jaime wanted forgiveness, appreciation—even if he denied it.

Daenerys was under no illusions. Jaime had served her father for years before he’d acted, so Lord Stark’s accusation was not incorrect. But all the realm had stood by. Her brother had stood by.

In the end, Jaime had acted: he saved the city. Sometimes, she wondered if he’d have fought for her father, until the very end, had he not learned of the wildfire. Would Jaime Lannister have kept his oath to the crown, had it not finally been overcome by his oath to the people?

“Under the Sept, there was the smell of alchemists’ brew. Wildfire, cousin Stannis told me.”

Jaime looked up, hearing the words. Ned just stared at her, uncomprehending. They stopped before the golden knight, who looked as tired as Lord Stark. She motioned for Jaime to continue the story, but he shook his head, his pride too great. She rolled her eyes.

So many things in this world could be solved if people simply spoke and listened rather than suffer ridiculously convoluted misconceptions.

“My father died commanding his pyromancers to set the city aflame. Thousands of barrels of wildfire, under King’s Landing. Jaime may have stood by for many things, but he did act, my Lord. He saved everyone.”

Ned Stark stood there, staring at her as if he’s suddenly woken in a strange place. She looked up at him, earnest.

“It’s true. Cousin Stannis confirmed it. Believe his word, if not mine.”

She let go of his arms and motioned for Ser Justin to follow her. “Tyene is setting up our meal at the end of the path. It’s within an outcropping of tall rocks, which stops the wind. Please join us after you talk.”

With a smile, she turned away, rather pleased with herself. There, now Lord Stark knew the truth, and Jaime could stop looking like a kicked dog whenever the man turned away from him. It was earlier than she’d intended, but at least it occurred!

She smirked at Ser Justin. “I told you I could get them to speak!”

She glanced over her shoulder, where the men were having a rather awkward conversation. The truth fixed everything!

He sighed, but there was a small grin fighting to emerge. “I swear, the things you do to prove a point.”

She raised her chin up, haughty. “Lord Stark is good, Jaime is mostly good. They simply had to speak about whatever was troubling them. I helped.”

_I wish it wasn’t about father, however. Perhaps that is my punishment for tricking them._

“So many of your plans could potentially lead to ruin.” He placed his hand upon his chest, ruminating. “Especially for your poor guard, whom has already lost at least a decade of his life.”

“I could ask cousin Stannis to replace you,” she threatened sweetly. “And then you may keep your
remaining years.”

She skipped far ahead of him, turning to walk backward, smug. Behind him, Jaime and Lord Stark were small, distant figures.

“Alas,” he mourned, raising his voice to be heard over the distance. “No other knight is a patient and brave as I! The others would probably quit within the week, if your acts had not driven them to their graves.”

She glared at him. “I will have you know I am a wonderful—”

A terrified scream pierced the air.

For one heartbeat, she was frozen. Tyene.

Daenerys sprinted, ignoring Justin, who shouted for her to wait. She exited the path, looking around frantically. No one.

Another scream, this one of pain. She jerked her head towards the outcropping of rocks, and didn’t hesitate to run forward.

“Shut up, you fuckin’ whore!”

The sound of flesh hitting flesh. A sob followed.

Daenerys rounded the corner and jerked to a halt. For a moment, she didn’t understand what she was seeing.

Facing away from her, a large man was sitting upon a squirming form, untying his breeches with one hand, and clenching his victim’s arms over her head with the other. Around him, scraps of ripped clothing were littered about like dying flowers.

“You’ll like it,” he laughed, “They always do.”

He released his breeches, and Daenerys saw a glimpse of something alien. Tyene screamed again, and he backhanded her. She began to sob in pain. One of the silver needs in her hair was dislodged, tumbling down onto the grass beside her.

Daenerys’s registered all this in the space of a few seconds, her brain scrambling to understand what was happening.

Over his shoulder, she met Tyene’s gaze. Her blue eyes were filled with tears, and something else.

Tyene… I have to save her.

She saw a large rock by her feet—the same rock that had been there in the countless times they’d eaten here. Daenerys picked it up, and that’s when he moved aside just enough for Tyene to see her.

She approached him, almost in a trance. Her mind was silent. He was too distracted ripping Tyene’s clothes to hear her.

“Princess!” Ser Justin rounded the corner, and the men jerked his face around just in time for her to bring to stone down brutally against his temple. He screamed.

In one smooth movement, Tyene dislodged him.
The maid grabbed Daenerys and jerked her away as the man lurched to the side, shouting in pain.

He turned to them, holding his bleeding head, and Ser Justin ran to place himself before the women, his sword drawn. He held it at the man’s throat.

Seconds later, Jaime and Lord Stark rounded burst around the corner, panting. The took in the scene. Saw Tyene’s exposed body, before jerking their eyes away. They saw the bloody stone in her hands, clutched tightly, and the blood on the man’s face.

All the while, Daenerys could only stare at the thing swinging between the terrible man’s legs.

*****

Tyene Sand stood before Dragonstone’s throne, making a show of sobbing, her body hunched. Inside, she was gleeful. It had been perfect, even if the princess had arrived later than she’d anticipated. Well, Suggs had served his purpose, and she’d get her vengeance soon enough. Thankfully, her numbing agent completely took away the pain.

She felt neither guilt nor shame. The disgusting man should never have touched those weaker than him, if he didn’t want to be in this position. Normally, she’d take care of such a person quietly, but in this case, she’d needed him.

Well, she amended, she wasn’t guilty for how she’d trapped him, but she regretted how much Daenerys had seen. The color still hadn’t returned to her face. She stood to the side of Stannis’s throne, beside Myra, who held her close. Daenerys hadn’t left Myra’s side since the event, and refused to allow Tyene to go anywhere she couldn’t see her.

Stannis stared down at her from his seat, and she was aware of the eyes of many highborn guests. Eddard Stark and Jaime Lannister stood at the base of the throne, side by side, equally somber. As soon as she’d been ‘rescued,’ they’d taken Suggs to the dungeons to be held until everything could be sorted out. Ser Jaime had given her his white cloak, and she’d nearly retched just touching something that belonged to a Lannister. Still, she’d reluctantly taken the offering, demurely hiding her body.

Sometimes, she really tired of this act.

They’d completed the first day of the tourney, had a celebratory feast for the winners, and were now meeting at dusk to see to this matter. She didn’t begrudge the order of events. Tyene was a pragmatic person, and she did not expect this affair to be relevant to most. Right now, the throne room was filled with perhaps only a tenth of their guests—most due to boredom than a desire for justice—but it was more than enough.

“Bring him in,” Stannis ordered, and Tyene made herself flinch.

She looked behind her, as did many of those in the room, and saw Suggs being led inside by some guards. He held his head high, a man sure that he’d soon be released.

Ser Godry Farring immediately stepped out of the crowd, taking a position beside Suggs. The two men were friends, but while he looked down on women, Farring he didn’t share Sugg’s propensity for rape. But he certainly didn’t try to halt Sugg’s acts.

“Ser Clayton of House Suggs,” Stannis began, voice ice. “You stand accused of assaulting my Ward’s maid. Three witnesses were present. What say you?”

Daenerys opened her mouth, trying to step forward, but Myra halted her.
“It’s not my fault she likes it rough. Beg pardon, my Lord, but the maid and I have an understanding. She likes being smacked around a bit; makes her hot.” There was a careless amusement in his tone.

Tyene’s clenched her hands, desiring to kill him where he stoods.

“Tyene,” Stannis began, and she looked up, properly meek. “Is that he says correct?”

She shot Suggs a look, and there was a warning in his eyes. Beside him, Godry Farring had a similar expression. Earlier, she’d gotten a note describing all the horrible things that would happen to her should she tell the truth. Inwardly, she snorted. The threats of small men didn’t concern her. The note was the stupidest thing they could have done.

For show, she hesitated, looking between Stannis and Suggs in fear. “I…”

A smug look was in the pig’s eyes.

Stannis grew cooler. “What is your response? Do you confirm Ser Suggs’s story?”

She threw herself down, enjoying the act more than she should. She’d have liked to be an actress, perhaps in Braavos. “He lies, M’lord. He lies! Please! I am so frightened!” she began to cry.

“Tell the truth, lowborn slut!” Suggs snapped.

“Silence!” Stannis ordered, and the pig immediate retreated.

“M’lord,” she began, and with a shaking hand, took out the letter. “I-I received this earlier. I do not know what to do, m’lord, but I cannot keep silent. Perhaps if it was only I at risk, I would obey was is here written. But I will not put the Lady Daenerys at risk…”

Farring’s eyes grew wide, mouth dropping open.

Stannis surged to his feet. “Bring me the letter!” he ordered.

A guard immediately stepped forward, and she relinquished it to him without a fuss. He walked up the steps, and Stannis snatched the brief missive from him.

*You better lie at the trial, whore, or you’ll beg for death when my men and I are done with you.*

“It appeared in my room, m’lord,” she sobbed. “I was so frightened! But then I realized that whoever snuck in could also get to my Lady, and I simply could not lie…”

The sender’s greatest mistake was leaving the message in her room. She slept in a small, personal handmaid’s quarters. Her room was connected to Daenerys’s own, and there was no lock between them. Stannis Baratheon may not personally care for her, but for Daenerys…

“Davos. Find whoever delivered this letter,” Stannis ordered, handing it to his advisor. “I want to know every person with access Daenerys’s quarters. Interrogate the guards, the servants, everyone. Reward whoever has information. The sender will be found and brought before me. Begin with all known associates of Ser Clayton.”

Farring paled, taking a step away from Suggs. The latter was beginning to look pale.

Tyene smirked, keeping her head low. *Fools.*

“Ser Clayton Suggs, you have assaulted a member of my household. You will be punished.”
Suggs surged forward, but was yanked back by his jailers. “She’s just a lowborn maid! I am a Knight sworn to your service! My Lord, you would punish those loyal to you on the word of some lowborn woman? I didn’t rape her!”

Around them, members of the nobility stirred, murmurs between them.

“She’s lowborn,” someone muttered.

“So much fuss over a maid,” another said.

“It’s not like the girl was actually raped.”

“Punishing a knight for some lowborn girl. She likely tempted him,” a sneering female voice muttered.

Tyene kept her head to the floor in disgust. She was reminded why the most highborn were a waste of air. She peeked up at Daenerys, who was looking around the murmuring room with a blank face. Disappointment was gathering in Tyene’s stomach.

Stannis looked around at the people, face inscrutable. Suggs was looking a bit smug.

“My Lord,” Farring stepped forward, obviously regaining his confidence. “Ser Suggs made mistake in the heat of passion, as we all do. No actual crime was committed, after all. The girl’s virtue is intact, is that not correct, maid?”

Stannis turned his gaze to her, waiting. Slowly, she nodded. “Yes.”

“I’m sure the witnesses can confirm the truth?” Farring looked expectantly at Stannis and Ned. Both hesitated, but reluctantly confirmed her words.

Daenerys face remained blank. Tyene’s disappointment deepened.

She is still young, Tyene told herself. It was too soon for this test.

“You believe that I should stay my punishment, then?” Stannis inquired.

“if it pleases my lord, he should, of course, be reprimanded for telling you falsely. But as no other crime was committed, so the punishment cannot be too harsh, I believe. You pardon, my Lord, but she is only a lowborn maid.”

There were murmurs of agreement in the crowd. Tyene tried to halt the anger in her gut. She would have her own vengeance on Suggs; she didn’t need public retribution.

“Does anyone present believe I should punish Ser Suggs for his actions?” Stannis questioned, voice remote.

For many moments, only silence. Tyene glanced at Jaime Lannister, whose knuckled were white. Ned Stark looked around at the gathering, grim. She saw his mouth open—

I do,” Daenerys declared, fists clenched at her sides. The blank mask cracked, and rage lit her eyes. “I do!”

She looked around the room, disgust on her face, and strode down the stairs to stand beside Tyene in solidarity. “How can any of you let this pass? How?”

Her body was shaking, and tears gathered in her eyes. “Does Westeros really not punish crimes just
because the victim is lowborn? And you call yourselves noble!”

The room began to mutter, most voices rising in anger at the words.

“How dare you—!” one woman gasped.

“How crude,” a knight muttered. “But what else can one expect from a Targaryen?”

Daenerys flinched.

“Lord Stannis, this is highly improper. I insist that you take your ward in hand—”

“Lady Bar Emmon,” Myra interrupted, voice loud and clear. There was something simmering beneath the calm tone. “Your daughter has turned fourteen now, is that correct? Araenet, I believe.”

Stannis didn’t stop her, instead, he leaned back. Myra’s face was impassive.

The room silence in confusion. The lady in dark blue silk startled as attention was suddenly turned to her. “Why—yes. My Lady, what—”

“Ser Wylis Manderly,” she said, turning to the large lord. He jumped. “You have two daughters. I enjoyed your stories of them, my lord.”

He blinked owlishly at her.

She left Stannis’s side, walking slowly down the steps. She held her head high, face impassive, and began to address lords and ladies in the room.

“I hope you mother had recovered from her illness, Lady Belmore…

“…your sister is lovely, Lord Peasebury. I enjoyed her company these past months…

“…tell me, has your daughter made it safely home, Lord Durwell?”

On and on she went, speaking to many of those present. Tyene was actually shocked by how much she knew of them all, or their families. They looked equally astonished.

Myra finally came to a stop before Daenerys, and gently wiped the tears in her eyes with a soft, embroidered cloth. Then she turned and helped Tyene to her feet, and turned her to face the crowd, sweeping her hair back to show the bruises.

“Imaging planning a meal with your mother, sister, daughter, my lords and ladies. Imaging the excitement and innocent joy you feel.” A brief pause. “And then imagine finding her struggling while a man is holding her down as she screams.”

More than one person flinched. “Imagine watching that man hit her, over and over, as she sobs. As he tares her clothing off, and touches her. Imaging watching him get ready to rape her!” The words gradually increased in volume, and Myra’s calm mask broke.

More than one person drew back at the absolute rage on her face.

“Now see her here, standing before a crowd, as they let her attacker walk away!” she thrust her hand, finger extended, pointing it at Suggs. More than one face darkened, and the mood in the crowd grew somber. Many couldn’t look at Tyene, shame on their faces. “Tell me, Lady Bar Emmon, Ser Wylis, Lady Belmore, Lord Peasebury, Lord Durwell: is this crime not deserving of justice?”
The Houses she’s called out could do nothing but stutter out their agreement. The rest of the room was speechless.

Then she turned to Daenerys, whose tears had dried. “My love, you protest allowing Ser Suggs to pass without punishment. Stand before your lord and argue your case.”

Daenerys stared at her, and slowly calmed. Then, taking a large breath, she turned to Stannis, meeting his eyes squarely. “She is a member of your household. Bastard or trueborn, man or woman, you swore to protect them. You told me ‘A lord’s first responsibility is to his people.’ So what if he’s a knight,” she sneered the word. “So what if she’s lowborn. Justice must prevail, cousin! As a lord, a good lord, you must punish him!”

Total stillness. No one dared to breathe.

Tyene’s heart nearly burst with pride.

The Lord of Dragonstone remained impassive.

“The Targaryen has grown too bold, my lord!” Suggs exploded. Sweat beaded on his brow. He felt the situation slipping away, and now he could only try to put the attention on another. “You can’t let this behaviour continue. First, she insults your guests, and now she commands her liege! She’s making you seem weak before all the realms! Discipline her, my lord!”

Stannis and Daenerys stared at each other, not looking away. Then Stannis slid his eyes to Suggs, assessing.

“You are correct,” Stannis said.

Daenerys took a step back as if struck. Many stared at Stannis, something like disbelief on their faces. A few looked gleeful. Tyene memorized them.

Tyene stepped forward, “M’lord, she didn’t mean—”

He quelled her with a sharp glare.

“Daenerys, as a ward of this house, you have been rude to our guests, and therefore you will personally apologize to them, and remain in your rooms for the next two days of the tourney.” Stannis paused, and the princess nodded, once, her lips trembling.

“Yes, my Lord,” her voice was remote, hollow. Tyene felt for her; she’d been shown what the realm was really like to the lowborn. No Lord would punish a knight for a mere servant.

“Now, tell me, Daenerys Stormborn,” Stannis stood, hands clasped at his back. “How shall I punish Ser Clayton Suggs?”

The room gasped.

Daenerys’s head snapped up, eyes wide. “Cousin,” she whispered, eyes shining. Stannis remained impassive.

“My lord!” Suggs begged, trying to walk forward. His guards yanked him back. “My lord, please!”

“Imprisonment? A flaying? Exile? Keep in mind that he did not rape her, so gelding would therefore be an unjust punishment.”

Daenerys paused, contemplative. She turned to Suggs, something calculating in her eyes.
“But he did hurt her,” she said, voice like ice. “Cut off his hand…his sword hand.”

“No!” Suggs screamed trying to break away from his shocked guards. In fact, the whole room seemed astonished by her viciousness. Jaime’s mouth had dropped open, and Ned Stark looked as if he’d been punched in the stomach.

Even Tyene was stunned. The punishment was brutally calculated: Suggs would not only lose his appendage, but his very ability to earn gold. Without his hand, he could no longer be a knight: he would be useless.

For a moment, Stannis’s mask slipped, and astonishment shone in his eyes. He recovered quickly. The only person that seemed unaffected was lady Myra, who gazed at Daenerys with a soft, nostalgic smile.

Lord and ward stared at each other, and then Stannis nodded to his guard. “Very well. Take him to the courtyard, and prepare him. Send for the maester.”

“My Lord!” the man squealed like a struck pig. He looked desperately to Ser Farring, but the large man disappeared into the crowd. Suggs continued to shout as they dragged him away.

Stannis climbed down the steps, and stopped before Daenerys. “Are you positive?”

She nodded. “I can do it,” she suggested, but her voice wavered terribly. “Jon has told me that in the North, the one who passes the sentence must swing the sword.” Lord Stark looked startled. She raised her chin. “So, I can do it.”

Stannis placed his palm on her head, just for an instant. Daenerys relaxed, just a bit. “Not even Eddard Stark would make a child of nine do it. And you are not correct; you suggested the sentence, but I am passing it. However, you will watch. Decisions have consequences.”

She swallowed, hard, but nodded.

Myra drew her close. “You did well, my love,” she lady whispered, and Daenerys hugged her tightly. "Thank you, Myra."

Ned and Jaime approached.

“Will I still be welcomed at Winterfell, Lord Stark?” Daenerys asked, uncertain. The larger man gazed down at her.

“Aye, my lady. It would be my honor.”

Jaime simply stared at her, a peculiar light in his eye. She scowled at him. “You cannot judge me. It would make you a hypocrite. That’s a very unattractive trait, Ser.”

There was hurt under the words. Jaime shook his head. “I’m simply thinking that good things can come from evil,” he said vaguely, and reached out to ruffle her hair as he passed. She blinked after him, bemused.

They all made their way to the courtyard. Word had spread, and when they arrive, a large crowd was waiting. Many were whispering amongst each other, no doubt relaying the events and adding outlandish spins.

Well, I achieved what I set out to do. She’ll never stop surprising me; of that I am positive. Tyene gazed at the little dragon, who was holding her hand tightly, with such fondness her heart might bust.
She had to write to her uncle at once.

Tyene stood beside the family as Stannis drew his sword. Suggs was crying, held down with his hand out. Stannis stared down at him, impassive.

“Switch hands,” the lord finally said. “The crime must fit the punishment.”

They did as ordered, and Daenerys frowned but didn’t protest.

“Let this be a lesson to all who seek to harm those under my protection,” Stannis intoned. “Ser Clayton of House Suggs, as Lord of Dragonstone, I declare that for your crimes, your hand is forfeit.”

He removed Sugg’s hand with one clean stroke. The man’s scream pierced the courtyard.

Daenerys turned green as she watched the blood gush, and the appendage roll across the floor. The mud was quickly stained red.

The young princess bent over and vomited.

*****

Dear Jon,

Your letter arrived today, in the midst of my sorrow. Is that a sign, do you think? You swore to make me happy, and you seem to always be succeeding. But perhaps you will stop trying now.

You see, today a man tried to rape my maid. I saw it. I saw everything. As punishment, I convinced cousin Stannis to cut off his hand. I am a hypocrite, who told you that I despise bloodshed, and yet today I demanded it. Do you hate me, now? Am I a monster, like my father? Is this who Maester Aemon will grow to know: will he one day cease writing?

Will you?

It was the most horrible sight I have ever seen. My stomach couldn’t take it, and I was carried away by cousin Stannis as if I were a babe. Now all the realm will know that not only am I cruel, but also a coward.

I cried myself to sleep. I don’t know if I can bring myself to send you this letter. But you were honest about the wildlings. Would you have forgiven your opponent, if he’d done to someone as this man did to Tyene? Would you have killed him? I don’t know what response I want.

I forgot to tell you last time, but your father is here. Lord Stark is an amazing man. They tell me you are like him, which mean already you are a better person than I. Lord Stark saw it all. He says I am still welcome in his home, but I don’t know if I believe him. I have shown that I am my father’s daughter.

Will I go mad like him, too?

Tell me your thoughts, Jon Snow. Who am I, in your eyes? When you reach the Trident and read this, will you try to escape your future with me?

Daenerys
Answering some common questions:

Meeting between Jon and Dany: After Act 6. This chapter is nearly the end of Act 3. Why so long? Because they both need to develop as their own people.

Time skip: the next two years will be skimmed over (Dany will turn 11 and Jon 12 before the next 'big' things.)

Dragon's and Direwolves: Secret :)

Do I like comments?: Yes :D
I mean to get this out a couple of hours ago, but the end of the semester is busy. I won’t be able to update as often these next few weeks. Projects and finals are on the way. ;-;

Also, on Nov 14th, I revised the trial scene in chapter 26. I wasn’t satisfied with it, too many things didn’t work well. The new version has Myra calling out the lords and ladies.

Warning for this chapter: the third scene (Clayton Suggs PoV) has mature themes.

Far below him was a network of islands connected by small bridges. A fog hung over the clustered houses, which were occasionally disrupted by a large manse. Only those wealthy buildings had any foliage; the rest of the connected islands were bare of anything but bricks and human bodies. The moving people looked so tiny, as if he were a giant, and they, simply ants below his feet.

Jon Snow jumped off his perch and soared down, down, down into the mist, looking beneath him at the few people walking the early morning streets. They were either dressed brightly and wielding swords, garbed mutely in browns or yellow, or clothed severely in blacks and dark blues. He choked his head and flew lower, past brightly decorated stands selling everything—most he could recognize, much he could not. Fish, oysters, bread, meat…beads, silks, laces, ribbons…on and on the stands continued, forming a massive marketplace, unlike anything he’d ever seen before. As he flew, he saw strangely garbed people, chanting or praying or performing queer rituals, and became aware of all the many different temples in this place.

He cocked his head and landed on a high building, looking down at the marketplace, empty except for their merchants and a few early customers. As he perched there, the early morning streets slowly filled with people—more people than he’d ever seen before! More people than in the entire North, he guessed, although that was probably not so. The bazaar below him began to awaken with the noises of laughter, bartering, and arguments.

A caw to his right stole his attention, and Jon turned his head see a raven land beside him. In its clear black eyes, he saw the reflection of a black hawk with red plumage on its chest. Jon blinked, and the hawk mimicked it.

A massive roar shocked him awake.

Jon shot up from his cot, stumbling to his feet, disoriented and panicked. He looked around at the small cabin he shared with Oberyn, seeing nothing out of the ordinary, and shook his head, perplexed. He stood still, listening, but there was no commotion on deck, and whatever he’d heard didn’t repeat itself.

Did I imagine it…?

Jon dragged a hand across his face, blinking away the fog in his brain. He’d been dreaming of something…but now he couldn’t remember what. He shook his head, trying to piece together the memories, but they were elusive as the wind.
With a sigh, Jon stumbled over to the pitcher of watered down wine on the small chest by Oberyn’s empty bed, and took a long drink. He blinked a few times, clearing his eyes of sleeping-crust, and yawned as he looked around.

It was rare that he’d awoken before Oberyn. The prince often stayed abed until noon, and then stayed awake the rest of the day and night, gambling with the ship’s crew, or drinking, or torturing Jon with hundreds of activities meant to strengthen him.

His body ached, and he had to piss.

Grumbling at being awakened much too early, he stumbled out of the small room and walked down the stairs one level below, where the privy was situated. The natural rocking of the ship filled the carved holes with sea-water, cleaning them out. Jon thought it rather ingenious, remembering the privies at Winterfell or, worse, those at Castle Black.

He finished his business, rinsed off his hands, and began the trek up to the deck, yawning again. Perhaps he could simply go back to sleep? Maybe Oberyn hadn’t even found his bed yet, although he’d never stayed up so late that dawn broke the horizon. Or mayhap he’d simply fallen asleep somewhere else.

Jon kept walking, deciding to go in search of his ser and ensure he hadn’t somehow gotten himself killed or maimed since he’d last seen him. Oberyn had the tendency to madden people, and nearly a fortnight on this boat with him had Jon ready to commit murder himself. And Oberyn hadn’t fleeced him of coin like he did with the crew.

He did make it difficult to sleep, though. Jon grimaced, remembering Oberyn’s late night snickering when he remembered the Lannisters’ predicament.

Groaning, Jon stretched his arms over his head. His muscles felt like lead. Oberyn had him lifting sacks filled with rocks every night before he slept. Every week that passed, he would increase the weight by five. Jon was up to thirty a night, and dreaded the end of the week.

“If you ever hope to wield Dark Sister, scrawny boy, then there must be something more than bones in those arms.”

Jon self-consciously rubbed the aforementioned skinny arms, scowling. He was young, was all. His father was a large man; strong. Jon would look like him when he grew up.

He reached the door to the deck, squinting against the sun as he climbed up.

Jon rubbed his eyes, looked around, and froze.

“What…?” Jon wondered if he was still dreaming.

“Ah, broody boy, you are awake. Excellent, we are about to dock,” Oberyn sauntered over, a casual smile on his face. He threw a small bag at Jon, but the boy was too shocked to catch it. It hit the floor with a metallic clatter.

At the moment, the boat shook as it hit the peer, and men jumped off to tie the ship and anchor it. Jon stood frozen, eyes huge as he stared at the hundreds of ships docked around then, and the giant city in front of them!

He flipped around, staring at Oberyn, appalled. The Viper tilted his head, watching Jon with an entertained look.
“Where are we?” Jon shouted, ignoring the looks people shot him.

Oberyn’s smile was razor-sharp. “Welcome to Braavos, Jon Snow. A magnificent city, is it not?”

“Braavos?” he echoed, stupidly. It sounded like a foreign word, probably because it was!

“Braavos?”

Oberyn pointed to something behind Jon, and the boy looked over his shoulder. He stood there, gaping like an idiot as he cranked his head back and back. A massive statue of a warrior, sword high, towered over the sea. His legs were on two different islands, and the only passageway Jon could see was underneath him. The rest of the cove was surrounded by tall, jagged mountains.

“That’s the Titan of Braavos,” Jon said. “We’re in Braavos. We’re in Essos.”

Oberyn walked up beside him, and leaned down to pick up the bag he’d thrown. He pushed a hand through his long black hair, which undulated in the sea breeze.

“The greatest of the Free Cities. And the location of the most famous courtesans. Ah, I have spent many pleasurable nights in Braavos,” Oberyn sighed, nostalgic. “You have not lived until you have been invited to The Black Pearl’s bed.”

Jon shot Oberyn an irritated glare, and slowly relaxed his shoulders. “You said the Trident,” Jon accused. “Did we happen to get lost on the way there? Is west and east so difficult to differentiate? Here is a hint; follow the sunset!”

Oberyn snickered, completely unbothered.

Jon sighed. “Others take me, how am I supposed to send letters from Braavos?”

Oberyn smirked at him, sly. “These letters of yours must be entertaining indeed if they are your main concern.”

Jon blushed, and looked away, scowling. Then he slumped. “I suppose we’ll be staying here for—what? Another six months? Tell me, when you said Trident, did you mean before or after my next nameday?”

Jon really shouldn’t have been so surprised. He cursed himself, actually. He should have made Oberyn tell him exactly where they were going, not just one of the destinations. Gods, he should have learned the first time!

“And how did you manage to keep the crew from revealing the truth? Captain Saavoy told me just last night that it would take another week to reach the Bay of Crabs.”

“Relax, broody boy,” Oberyn chuckled and placed the bag in his hand atop Jon’s head. He let go, and Jon scrambled to catch it before it fell, glaring at Oberyn once he did. “We are only in Braavos for two days, as we trade our goods and retrieve new ones. This is a merchant vessel, you recall. And then we head west.”

“Were we always coming to Braavos?” Jon asked, frowning. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Oberyn leaned back, his red and orange silks swaying in the breeze. “I have been on this boat for days. Am I not allowed some entertainment?”

Jon shot him an annoyed look. “Do you remember that first day under the heart tree? You told me that many people hated you; I’m beginning understand why.”
Oberyn snickered and walked around him. “Only the boring ones, broody boy. I am going out. Make use of that and explore the city. We depart on the third sunrise. Do not be late.”

Jon watched him walk towards the spear he’d placed on the wall, place it over his shoulder, and cheerfully left the boat. Jon finally looked at the bag in his hands. He peeked inside to see coins, square and imprinted with a man’s face.

Then he glanced after Oberyn, waited till he turned a corner, and then quickly began to follow him.

But as soon as Jon turned that same corner, he was confronted with a mass of strangers. Oberyn Martell was gone. Jon cursed, trying to see over the crowd. He noticed a set of stairs leading up to a balcony, and climbed them without pause. But no matter how much he searched, the Dornishman was gone.

Jon would have to try harder next time.

Irritated, Jon looked around at the city. Braavos. Jon Snow was in Braavos. Unwillingly, he felt the thrill of excitement. He was about to join the crowd, when he suddenly remembered: he’d left Dark Sister in their cabin, a sword worth more than most castles. He looked back at the ship, conflicted. The crowd around him seemed genial enough… but if he took the sword with him, he’d just be a young boy, alone, with a target for thieves attached to his back. He didn’t know enough about this city to risk it.

Dark Sister was his responsibility. As much as he wished he could trust the crew, he didn’t. Not with Daenerys’ family sword. He actually felt a bit sick that he’d forgotten it when he’d impulsively gone after Oberyn.

With a sigh, his shoulders slumped, and he headed back to the ship. Maester Aemon and Lord Bloodraven gave it into his keeping. He wouldn’t be the fool that lost Dark Sister in Essos. Maybe he’d explore when Oberyn returned, and he could leave the sword with him.

After all, he’d never get to see Braavos again.

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Stannis was seated at his desk when Myra walked in, a squirming Ryelle in her arms. She placed the infant down, and the little girl with his hair and Daenerys’ eyes began to toddle around, exploring the new location. Stannis felt a warmth in his chest when he looked upon his daughter, a peace that had been absent in his life growing up.

Sometimes he wondered what would have happened to him had he not taken this island and a small Targaryen babe all those years ago. Would he have been happy?

Myra came around the desk and stood beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. Stannis touched her hand briefly, and then continued his work, calculating the sums needed to hire more blacksmiths. While Mott would be the one to smelt the metal, the new men would form it into armor.

Stannis leaned back, stretching his sore neck.

Myra came around behind him, and began to knead his sore muscles. Stannis sighed, relaxing back. He’d been sitting here for hours after the trial, and the sun was all but gone. He glanced back down at Ryelle, wondering why she was still awake. He assumed Myra was on her way to bed, and came to fetch him.

“How is Daenerys?” he asked, finishing the calculation.
“Scared,” Myra sighed. “She doesn’t want to sleep alone. Or perhaps she doesn’t want to let Tyene out of her sight. She insisted that the girls would share the bed.”

Stannis exhaled sharply, clenching his hand tightly around the quill. It snapped, staining his hand in ink.

“Seven hells,” he cursed quietly. Myra took out a cloth from the folds of her sky blue dress, and rubbed the ink away.

“She should never have seen such a thing,” Stannis ground his teeth. “Never.”

Myra remained quiet. “No. But I am not averse to the consequences. You are proud of her as well, my lord husband.”

Stannis leaned back, remembering the trial: a small child, eyes blazing with protective rage, ordering a man’s hand in payment. “Even I did not expect her response. I am proud, although I should not be.”

“Why?” Myra walked around the desk and poured herself some wine from the pitcher the servants kept filled.

Stannis leaned back, sighing as he rubbed his temple. “Does her viciousness not worry you, wife? A child of nine demanded dismemberment, and in such a way as to completely destroy a man’s life. Had she known more of rape, she would have demanded his… equipment. What will such a child grow to become?”

“A woman who protects the weak. A woman who is not afraid to speak on their behalf.” Myra smiled, taking a sip of her wine. “Fire and blood, my love. They are not mere words, but a warning. The dragon’s blood is not weak, although the past has shown it is often foolish.”

Stannis met eyes with his wife, who looked entirely too pleased. “What are you raising her towards, Myra? I see the difference, between her and Steffon. You love our son, but Daenerys… her education is different. You never hesitate to assure her she deserves everything.”

Myra’s smile faded, and she swirled the wine. “Don’t ask questions you know the answer to, husband.”

Stannis cursed and surged to his feet, pacing with his hands clutched behind him. “I will not rebel, Myra. You know me better than any other. The law is the law, and Robert is king. I made my choice ten years ago.”

Myra stood as well, eyes sparkling. Ryelle looked up from a carving in the wall she’d been examining, eyes wide. “You would allow Joffrey to have the throne, husband? Not even Aerys was as cruel. Life broke the Mad King, but Joffrey? He was born reveling in the pain of others.”

Stannis ground his teeth together, remembering a younger Daenerys, crying from the pain of tiny bruises and scratches. Terrified to leave her room, in case she saw the prince. Even now, his young ward did everything in her power to avoid meeting him. Had Stannis himself not thought of ending Jon Snow’s life, had he seen inklings of Joffrey in him?

“The law is the law,” Stannis repeated, turning away. “Joffrey is young— he can be changed.” Stannis felt like a fool just saying the words. As long as the queen spoiled her son, and as long as Robert ignored the boy, there was little chance of change in his future. At least, not any positive one. He was only the Master of Ships by his brother’s whim. He had no power over the queen or crown prince.
“Can he?” Myra murmured. Then she sighed.

“Enough of this, husband. We know each others’ positions, let us not argue of this. Tell me, what response has the melee elicited?”

Stannis sat back down, grateful for the change in topic. Myra’s plans were only that— plans. She did not have the power to enact them, and while his wife too had dragon’s blood, he knew she cared for him. Her goals would not harm their family. Alone, she could not gather support to do as she wished.

“Nearly every house has come forward with bids for the armor, as have most of the Essosi magisters. A representative of Astapor, in particular, has shown strong interest.” Stannis darkened at the idea of slavers. “House Lannister, in particular, is coming on strongly.”

Myra’s eyes darkened. “Tell me you do not plan to sell to them. They deserve nothing from us.”

Stannis pictured two small, blood-stained banners thrown before the Iron Throne. He grimaced. “Do you propose that I shun Tywin Lannister, wife?”

“For all the King’s faults, he is no fan of the Lannisters— although he is weak to them. He will not order you to sell to them, nor can he, unless he wishes to anger the other lords.” Myra paused, and an interested light lit her gaze.

Ryelle waddled towards him, yawning. Stannis took her in her arms and the little girl curled up, sleepy. Stannis stared down at her, chest tight.

“Robert has shown less and less interest. Besides, Lord Tywin will not go crying to the King if I refuse him. He will look for other ways to get revenge. No, I will sell to the Westerlands— but my price will, of course, reflect the richness of the area. If they can afford it, they are welcome to our armor.”

Myra’s lips stretched slowly in amusement. “My talented husband. I should have guessed you planned for this.”

Stannis allowed a faint smile. And then he sobered again, remembering the tiring day.

“What repercussions has Sugg’s punishment had?”

Myra shrugged. “A few houses are grumbling at the insult. Many are making nuisances of themselves with the servants. The Essosi seem not to care, although if its due to the nature of the crime, or simply due to the fact that their cultures do not understand the intricacy of knighthood, I cannot say. A few Knights have departed, declaring that they refuse to remain in a place where the lord questions their honor.”

“I suppose Ser Godry Farring and his party was amongst them. Convenient, considering Davos has identified that the letter sent to Tyene came from his quarters.”

Myra snorted. “A fool, he was. That girl is not the easy target he believes.”

Stannis shot her a curious look, picturing Tyene in his mind. A more timid and innocent person he could not remember. But then, he paid her little attention, so he supposed Myra would know.

“And have the alliances you’ve cultivated suffered?”

Myra shrugged. “I will build new ones. Besides, we have better now: the armor will make us rich. That is its own power, as the Lannisters know. And don’t try to convince me that you’ll mourn a
decline in your popularity. You’ve been miserable these past months.” She laughed. “When the last of our guests finally leave, I have no doubt you’ll have a skip in your step.”

Stannis exhaled slowly, relaxing. “If I can make it from one side of the hall to the other without being stopped four times, I’ll count it a victory.”

Myra laughed, eyes shimmering. Stannis’ chest warmed, as it had that moment he’d cloaked her. Whatever his life may have been like without her, he couldn’t imagine it better than this.

A knock on the door drew his attention. “Enter.”

A maid came in, and curtseyed briefly. “My lady, you told me to alert you if—”

Myra stood, “Yes. Thank you, Raea.”

She curtseyed again and left.

Stannis eyed his wife. “Should I concern myself with this ‘alert’?”

She came towards him and kissed him softly. “Just confirming a suspicion, husband. A small house matter. Will you take Ryelle to bed? I will be along shortly.”

Stannis watched her leave, and looked down at his sleeping daughter. “You have formidable role models, daughter mine.”

Stannis smiled as she made his way to his room.

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Clayton Suggs awoke, disoriented from the milk of the poppy he’d been fed, and found that his mouth had been stuffed with a cloth. Eyes widening, he tried to take it out, and found that he couldn’t move. Blinking in confusion, he looked down, and saw that he’d been tied to the bed. He panicked and tried to rise, but his shouts were muffled by the gag, and the ropes held tight. Someone had tied a rope around his neck, and the more he struggled, the tighter the noose got.

“I wouldn’t move too much; it would be a pity if you strangled yourself, Ser.”

He swung his eyes to the corner, and saw the bitch maid come towards him, a gentle smile on her face. She sat at his bedside, closer than any woman who’d been under him ever got again. Suggs tried to move again, but she was right; any more movement, and he’d be unable to breathe. Already, it was difficult to swallow.

He met her eyes, and she showed no fear or timidity. Her blue eyes in the candlelight seemed black. As if nothing existed inside. Sweat began to gather on the back of his neck.

She leaned forward over him, and drew a nail down his cheek, smile in place. “I thought of killing you, of course. But it would be too suspicious now. Besides; it’s too easy.”

He stared at her, eyes wide. What was happening? Was he dreaming? Who was this woman? Her voice sounded different; not only the accent, but there was a weight in her sound that there hadn’t been before.

She reached into her hair, and took out a long, silver needle. “My father taught me that even the worst men can be useful. A daughter should respect her father’s teachings, do you not agree?”

The needle glinted in the light, and her smile was terrible.
She reached down and began to unlace his breeches. He began to shout, but she ignored him, smile in place. He looked desperately to the door, but no one came in. Where were the guards! Finally, his limp cock was revealed. Clayton tried to move his hips away, eyes on the needle, but he couldn’t. The needle around his neck tightened.

“So much trouble such a small thing has caused. My young princess is having nightmares, Ser. It is partly my fault, of course. But I think I’ll just punish you for it. You didn’t think I would let just a hand suffice?”

His stub burned at the mention, and Clayton’s eyes filled with tears. Someone help him!

She stabbed the needle through his member, and he screamed and screamed.

She jerked the needle out, and blood began to leak. Face bored, she poured a liquid into the wound, and he screamed again from the burn, sobbing. The bleeding stopped, and she wrapped the wound tightly with a white cloth.

“It’s an interesting poison,” she murmured. “Activated from contact with blood, causing a horrible, burning pain. Once in the body, it remains forever. It won’t kill you, but you’ll be in near constant pain. And of course, it will make erections… uncomfortable.”

He stared at her, horrified and trembling. *Who is this bitch?*

He stared at her, tears running down his face. She leaned over and dabbed at the tears, gentle and sweet.

“You’re mine now, Clayton Suggs.” He lay there, trembling, as she cut smoothly through the ropes. “If you serve me well, perhaps I’ll one day give you the antidote.”

He surged towards her, roaring, but she danced out of the way and punched him in the throat. He gasped, gurgling as he tried to breath.

The bitch tsked. “Try that again, Ser, and the next poison won’t be quite so nice.” She walked casually to the door, smiling. “And if you try to tell anyone about this, know that your future will be… difficult. Good day, Clayton Suggs.”

Clayton lay there, sobbing, and regretting that he’d ever touched her.

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Tyene walked casually out of the medical room, humming to herself. Part of her wanted to kill him, to ensure he could never be a nuisance, but most of her wanted to enjoy watching him suffer. He wouldn’t last long, anyway. Usually, victims of Whore’s Revenge killed themselves within the year. The constant pain tended to erode their desire for survival.

And no matter what she’d said, Tyene would never give him an antidote. Suggs should have begged to be sent to the Wall. It would have been a kinder end.

“Did you finish your business, my dear?” Myra Baratheon stepped out of a side hallway.

Tyene jerked to a stop, heart pounding. “my lady! I—I was simply—”

“I knew the Princess Elia, Tyene. And I have met Prince Oberyn at court before; he loved to visit, loved to boast about his daughters. And you share an… interesting resemblance to him. Not hair or skin, of course, but a resemblance, none the less.”
Tyene stared at her, lips pressed together. She dropped her King’s Landing accent. “Did you always
know?”

Myra smiled, clasping her hands before her. “Not until today. Your confirmation is appreciated,
Tyene Sand.”

Tyene looked away, cursing. It was over. Two years of her life, all for nothing.

*No, not nothing. I confirmed much.*

She already mourned leaving Daenerys, although she missed her home. “I guess you’ll send me
away now. Or maybe to the dungeon?”

“Why did you orchestrate all this?” Myra asked, stepping closer. “And don’t deny it; Ser Clayton
was stationed far from the kitchens, and the cook confirmed that you’d never gone down to get a
meal. Sloppy work, my dear.”

Tyene glared at her, mouth twisting in anger. She cursed herself.

For a single instant, she considered taking her other needle and ending this, but banished the thought.
Not only would it accomplish nothing, but it could ruin everything. “I wanted to challenge her. I
wanted to show the world who she was.”

Myra paused, hands held before her. “It could have gone very wrong, and not only for you.”

Tyene didn’t acknowledge it. “She was never in any danger.”

Myra studied her, and then nodded once. “You may be a talented actress, but even you cannot fake
caring. And you care for Daenerys.”

Tyene didn’t deny the words. She’d never meant to care for her; she was only supposed to watch
and report. Protect her, if needed. Even this plan was her own concoction, and her uncle would
probably not have approved if he’d known. And now she’d been discovered for her actions.

“I will not send you away,” Myra said, and Tyene stared at her. “Nor will I tell Lord Stannis. In
exchange, you will keep me informed of… matters to the south. Are we in agreement?”

Tyene hesitated, watching her carefully.

Myra smiled. “Or I could simply tell Daenerys the truth of who her… friend, really is.”

Tyene pictured the look of betrayal in small violet eyes, and she flinched, just a bit. Myra noted all of
this, and Tyene cursed herself for getting in this position. The Sand Snakes may have inherited their
father’s viciousness, but they’d also inherited his impulsive arrogance.

Defeated, she agreed. “Alright, my lady.”

Myra nodded. “Excellent. To your mistress now, my dear. She’s convinced she must keep you close
and protect you.”

Tyene’s heart softened, just a bit. She ignored the twinge of guilt.

She turned away, walking past Myra toward Daenerys’ chambers.

“And Tyene?”
She paused, looking back.

Myra’s face was hidden in the shadows. “If you hurt her like this again, I won’t send you back to Dorne, nor to the dungeons. I’ll see that you vanish.”

Tyene watched her walk away.

She returned to Daenerys' door and found Ser Justin outside. They blinked at each other, surprised.

“What are you doing here? Where’s Ser Arnold?”

Justin was sober as he stared at her, surprising for the perpetually laughing man. He was everything Tyene pretended to be. Sweet, innocent, no blood or pain stained his hands. Tyene felt uncomfortable under the careful perusal, his focus on the bruises on her face. She suddenly wanted to turn away.

“I couldn’t sleep. I keep picturing…” He looked away, swallowing. Then he met her eyes again, serious. She was startled by his intensity, this man who only laughed and smiled and joked.

“Clayton Suggs is no knight,” Justin said, voice clear. “He deserved that, and more.”

Tyene stared at him, a strange warmth in her chest.

She swallowed. This man would be horrified by what I’ve just done. The warmth was engulfed by ice, and she couldn’t quite meet his eyes.

“Thank you,” she murmured. She’d never felt so… uncomfortable in her own skin.

He nodded, clearing his throat. “If any man ever— ever harms or threatens you, I will aid you. I swear it. I— I take my vows seriously.”

Tyene stared at her. The sconces on the wall showed the tinge of red in his cheeks.

She felt her own face flush and was immediately horrified at herself.

What are you doing, Tyene Sand?

“I have to get inside,” she said, brisk.

Justin jumped, and his face flushed deeper. Tyene ignored the twinge of regret. He immediately moved aside. “Of course, I apologize.”

Tyene gripped the handle, ready to turn it. She hesitated. She looked back at him, noting the dejection on his face. “Thank you, Ser Justin.”

She entered before he could respond.

She slowly made her way to the sleeping room, but saw that the bed was empty. Instantly worried, she scanned the room and saw Daenerys, in her pure white nightdress, laying on the floor, so close to the fire she was surely uncomfortable.

“Where did you go?” the princess asked.

“I needed a private moment, m’lady,” she responded, making her way to the girl and seating herself
beside her. Daenerys was toying with something, and Tyene looked closer to see there was a smooth, black rock in her hand. Her fingers were stained by ash.

Tyene blinked, looking back at the fire. She didn’t remember any loose stones when she’d made the fire earlier.

“I woke up and you were gone. I thought that… that he’d come back to get you,” Daenerys’ voice was small.

Tyene sat closer, ignoring the blistering heat. “He is under guard, and too weak to harm a fly, m'lady. Do not worry.”

Daenerys stared at the flames, her eyes reflecting the flames. “Is what nearly happened to you… the same thing that happened to Princess Elia?”

Tyene started, shocked. “How do you— I mean, I’m not sure what you mean, m'lady. Princess Elia?"

“She was my good-sister. I learned terrible things happened to her.” The fire kept dancing, crackling in the silence.

Tyene didn’t know what to say, swallowing. A seamstress’s daughter should have no knowledge of what really happened to the previous royal family. It was suppressed knowledge in King’s Landing. Much of what was taught to children in the capital were fabrication and lies.

“I wish I could find the men who did it,” Daenerys continued, lips pressed tightly together. Her hands were clenched so tight, they were bloodless. “They should be punished.”

She threw the pebble into the fire.
In the end, Oberyn didn’t return during those two days, and none of the crew knew where he’d gone. Jon couldn’t leave the ship, The Summer Drift, not even with Dark Sister hidden in their cabin, under Oberyn’s mattress. As long as the ship was accessible like this, he just couldn’t rest easily. Any time he contemplated just taking the coins and going exploring, a nagging voice in his head called him a fool for risking such a valuable sword for a few hours of entertainment.

Jon Snow was nothing if not dutiful.

To work off his irritability, he spent his time helping the crew unload the merchandize, and then load the new haul. By the end of the first day, Jon’s arms and back ached fiercely, and his body begged him to quit. But he’d refused to complain. The longer he held out, the less than men on the ship teased him for his pretty face, skinny arms, and highborn upbringing—as they’d often done during the voyage. Oberyn had never intervened in those moments, saying Jon had to either force them to stop, or win their regard himself.

After hours of working without complaint, the men began to treat him with something like respect, even sharing bits of their lives with him, most in broken Common Tongue. Even a few of the Westerosi sailors, who’d kept their distance during the voyage, began to speak with him. Jon felt like he’d accomplished something, his chest swelling with pride.

Thankfully, they’d finished loading the ship just before luncheon on the second day. Most of the men had take the chance to escape into the city, seeking out other entertainment. The remaining took their meals on the deck, even inviting Jon into their circle. Afterwards, the crew milled around the deck, either gambling raucously, or snoring in the warm sun. Jon didn’t have interest in the first activity, and was too wound up for the second.

To distract himself and expel his excess energy, he’d spent a couple of hours working on basic sword stances with a long stick, and had even completed those maddening exercises Oberyn insisted on. But even that couldn’t distract him from the call of the city for long. In a burst of rebelliousness, Jon had climbed the main mast of the ship, going up so high he’d been able to see over some of the lowest buildings into the greater city beyond. From that height, he could even make the golden
thunderbolt atop the Sealord’s palace. He’d remained there for many moments, wishing he could see it up close.

But Jon Snow was used to being confronted with things he couldn’t have, all because another had thrust something upon him. For a single instance, he’d cursed the weight Dark Sister placed upon his shoulders. Jon didn’t want to be responsible for the relic of a dying dynasty.

He’d instantly felt guilty for his thoughts, and had immediately climbed down to check on the sword, half expecting to find his treacherous thought had made it disappear. He’d spent the remaining hour cleaning the metal with a pungent solution given to him by Maester Aemon.

Now, smelling of the stuff, Jon sat upon the railing of the ship, looking out into the city. He bit into a bright green apple, to starve off the hunger in his belly. The sweet tartness exploded on his tongue, and he supposed fresh fruit was one positive thing about this detour.

Jon hoped Oberyn would show up soon, so he could chuck the apple at the man’s head.

“Why you not go out, boy?” a man shouted in heavily accented, broken Common Tongue. Jon looked down to see a dark skinned, thick bodied man of the Summer Isle standing on the pier, hands on his hips. He couldn’t be more than ten years Jon’s elder. He met Jon’s gaze and grinned, his teeth a brilliant flash of white. Jon had never even seen a Summer Islander before coming to Braavos—there were none in the crew. “You sit and sit for hours, looking at city. Go, explore—you young!”

Jon shook his head, “I can’t.”

The man tsked, and then reached into his coat. He threw something Jon’s way, and the boy caught it reflexively in his free hand. He blinked down at the square coin. The man had misunderstood.

Jon threw the coin back, shaking his head. “I have coin. Thank you,” he tackled on, a bit awkwardly.

The man tilted his head. “Something keep you on ship, then? Shame. We dock sunup, and I see you on ship all day, even when work done. I shake my head in pity. In the Summer Isles, you will never find a child in same place; always they away, seeing world.”

Jon leaned farther down. “I envy them, then. I can’t leave this ship until my companion returns.”

And he’ll probably return minutes before we leave.

The man tsked again, walking closer. “Shame, shame.”

Jon decided it wouldn’t hurt to talk more with the man; he knew next to nothing of the Summer Isles. He quickly finished his apple, and threw the core back down onto the deck. Then Jon pushed off and landed crouched on the pier, a story below.

The man sat upon some crates, and Jon joined him, keeping his distance just in case. “I am Xhobar, of the Moon Lily,” he pointed towards a tall swan ship, with golden sails and the carving of a woman at it’s helm.

“Jon Snow,” the boy responded, and tensed instinctively, waiting for the scorn he normally got when he first introduced himself. But the man didn’t react. Jon kept forgetting how different the ‘outside’ world could be. He loved the North: it would always be his home. But he couldn’t deny the freedom he’d experienced on the ship, amongst sailors who were so varied themselves, most didn’t care that he wasn’t trueborn.
The man grinned at him. “Greetings. What brings you to Braavos, young friend?”

Jon explained about being a squire, and how they were on their way to Dorne.

“Ah, Dorne is known to me! They have small hot food. Pepper. My people, we love it; we eat it when celebrate the dead.”

Jon looked at him, surprised. “Celebrate?”

Xhobar nodded, reclining back against the crates and stretching like a lazy cat. “Just so. We drink and make love under stars. To celebrate lives that are gone.”

Jon was shocked at that. “You make—make love when someone passes?”

That seemed so disrespectful to Jon. Death should be a somber, grim affair.

The man released a booming laugh. “You are Westerosi, friend. The North, so says your name.” Jon tensed again, but the words were fact, not judgement. “What do you do for the dead?”

Jon relaxed again, and pictured Winterfell’s massive crypt. As boys, he and Robb use to dare each other to go in alone, convinced that something lived in their dark depths. “We bury our dead…and then we mourn them. Sometimes, we make statues.”

Xhobar blinked at him as if Jon’s traditions were the strange ones. “Such odd places in this world, young friend. Life and death: a cycle. We should not be sad; we must cheer their lives, and the memories of love shared. That way, the good stays.”

It was an odd concept, but Jon supposed that was true. His father still deeply mourned his father, brother, and sister, who’d been killed during the Rebellion. By Daenerys’s family, he thought, uncomfortable. He wondered, not for the first time, how his father truly felt about Jon’s marriage. Ned Stark refused to speak of what happened, and Jon’s knowledge of those stranger went only as far as hidden stories told by the servants, and seeing their likeness in the crypts. The idea of celebrating their lives was strange, despite their terrible ends, was not off-putting. Perhaps it would finally allow his father to make peace with it.

“In the Summer Isles, making love is to celebrate life. A most important right. A boy who cannot make love will never become a man.” His tone sure, as if teaching Jon a crucial life lesson.

The boy squirmed, a bit uncomfortable. He remembered Theon’s boasting about sex, of all the women he’d had. But Jon always thought, with the way Theon spoke of the act, that sex sounded…ugly. That it was something shameful. Certainly not a celebration. But maybe Theon was just doing it wrong. That wouldn’t surprise Jon.

“It’s not like that in the North,” he responded. “We don’t—we don’t place such importance on-on making love. It’s to have children, is all. In marriage. It’s—that is, we don’t talk about it.”

His face was feeling a bit warm. Why was he even speaking about this? Were all Summer Islanders so open about such a thing?

The man laughed, tinged in disbelief. “I pity your woman then, young friend.”

Jon’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

Xhobar shrugged. “Love is pleasure. How can anyone truly love, if you see the body as shameful? Your women must be crying for fulfilment.”
Jon’s face was flaming at this point. He didn’t have any idea what to say.

“But you are young yet. Ten? Twelve? Do not worry, you have time to learn. In the pleasure houses, they will teach you. In Jhala, my home, I was taught by Murdua, a renowned whore. They are honored in the Summer Isles for their skills with love making. Visit the houses, and ask for a woman from my home to teach you.” He patted Jon’s shoulder, almost pitying. “Then your woman will be happy.”

Jon had never been more aghast in his entire life! First Oberyn gave him advice on seduction, and now a perfect stranger he’d just met did as well. Did Jon just look like he’d be bad at—at making a woman ‘happy’?

Unwillingly, he pictured a woman with long, silver hair and deep violet eyes. It was their wedding night, and she lay nude under him, her gaze disappointed. His face immediate flamed in shame, and he banished the thought away.

_get a hold of yourself, Snow!_ Jon quickly changed the topic, insisting that he didn’t need any help.

He steered their discussion towards fighting techniques. Xhobar told him that Summer Islands were renown for their archery. Jon expressed an interest in that, and Xhobar retrieved his bow from the Moon Lily. It was heavy and carved differently than in the north. The man had shown him how to draw it properly, how to stand for the best result. The stance differed from what he was used to.

Unfortunately, he was unable to try it out. The bow was too large for him, and Jon’s arms were too weak to pull the string, to his chagrin. Xhobar arms were like tree trunks, corded with muscle. Jon decided that he would no longer complain about Oberyn’s strength training. He would eat more and get strong.

_and I’ll make my wife happy just fine_, he thought, annoyed.

Putting down the bow, Xhobar took out a flask from his inner coat pocket and took a swig. He offered it to Jon, who hesitantly sniffed the brew, instantly lightheaded from the powerful smell. He, Robb, and Theon has occasionally snuck pitchers of ale from the kitchens. Once, Jon had even gotten so drunk that he’d thrown up all over his shoes. But ale didn’t smell like **_this_**. He wanted to refuse, but he couldn’t without seeming like a green youth.

**How bad can it be?** Jon took a large gulp, and instantly regretted it. The liquid _burned_ like Lady Catelyn’s Seven Hells! Jon choked and began to cough desperately, trying to expel the evil brew. Surely this stuff couldn’t _actually_ be for drinking! His eyes watered and nose stung.

“Gods!” he sputtered, shuddering when the heat hit his empty stomach, which roiled in protest. “What _is_ that?”

Xhobar released a great, booming laugh. The men milling about the harbor turned, shooting them curious looks. Jon ducked, still coughing. He blinked his tears away, embarrassed.

“Summer Isle rum, friend. Powerful, yes?”

Jon coughed again, and took a breath. “Yes.”

“Small sips, friend. Not gulp, like that,” the sailor informed him, eyes twinkling in merriment.

“That would have been nice to know _beforehand_,” Jon muttered. The man grinned, unrepentant.

He held the flask back, but Xhobar shook his head. **“A gift for boy. Learn to drink, and become**
There seemed to be a lot of requirements for manhood in the Summer Isles.

Jon tried to refuse, but the sailor was insistent. He said that their ship was filled with rum; he would easily get more. Jon assumed the man pitied him for not being able to leave the Summer Drift.

As they were talking, a high, thin screech echoed above them. Everyone in the vicinity looked up. Jon shielded his eyes from the sun, squinting as he saw a shape overhead. As it got closer, he realized it was a massive bird, circling overhead. The black figure dived, and the men on the pier shouted in fear as they scattered. The bird spread its wings, halting its fall at the last moment, and perched itself on the railing of the Summer Drift. Jon watched, awed. Its wingspan was at least as long as he was tall, while its body was as large as Jon’s abdomen. Covered in glossy black feathers, with a downy red breast, it boasted a sharp crimson beak and matching long, curved claws. A vicious predator, designed for death.

Staring at it, Jon felt the strangest sense of familiarity, although he was sure he’d never seen such a bird before. There was a primal intelligence in its golden eyes.

For many seconds, the bird cocked its head and started down at Jon, almost like it was waiting for something. But when he did nothing, it turned away, and began leisurely pecking at its breast.

Xhobar blinked at the creature. “I have never seen fire hawk come so close to man.”

Fire hawk. It was almost ironic. Black as coal and red as blood, and named for flames. It was as if House Targaryen was following him.

“Maybe it belongs to someone,” Jon speculated. He wondered what the owner of such a magnificent creature could be like.

The bird screeched. Jon had the strange thought that his words had annoyed it.

Xhobar met the statement with dismissal. “Fire hawks not owned, friend. They fight until death before submit. Hawk is no slave.”

‘A dragon is not a slave,’ you see. Jon felt a chill, remembering the words from Daenerys first letter.

“In Jhala, we have stories of wild things that are not tamed,” Xhobar informed him, staring up at the bird with respect. “They wait for one of same blood. They wait for companion.”

Jon frowned, staring at the bird. At that second, it looked back down at him. Jon felt something in him reaching out, toward the bird. It connected, just for an instant. A primal, alien conscious reached out. Jon flinched away, retreating in mild panic.

Others take me, what…?

The hawk screeched once more, this time in what he knew was irritation, and then took off. They watched it until it’s form was only a tiny dot on the horizon, before it disappeared completely behind the Titan’s massive body. He didn’t see it again before they left Braavos.

But the memory stuck with him. Old Nan’s tales of age old Kings, stolen daughters, and animals with human souls echoed in his ears.

*****
Just before supper, the sun handing low on the horizon, Oberyn returned with a relaxed, graceful
lope. His expression was also one of feline contentment, and Jon had a feeling he knew exactly
where the prince had been. If there was one thing besides not having an opponent that Oberyn
Martell constantly complained about, it was not having a lover.

Jon wondered if he’d also used this opportunity to look into some other matter; something pertaining
to his long-term goals. Jon wasn’t an idiot; as soon as he’d learned about Princess Elia, he’d known
Oberyn, perhaps Dorne, were planning something.

“Ah, broody boy, did you enjoy the city? Braavos is a marvellous place, yes?” Oberyn grinned,
showing white teeth.

“The harbor is beautiful, Prince. I’m sure there are song written about it. Maybe even a mummery or
two.” Jon dug into his pocket for the bag of coins, and threw them at Oberyn, who caught in
surprise. Then Jon returned to his sword stances. He slowly went through the movements, scowl in
place.

Oberyn blinked at his young squire. “You did not leave? Gods, broody boy, I know you Northerners
are a stoic lot, but you are only ten. Much too young to be so boring.”

Jon shot Oberyn a glare, stopping his practice. He strode towards the man, who really was looking at
Jon with pity. “I am not boring. I’m just not an idiot! What did you expect me to do with Maester
Aemon’s gift? Leave it here, with no one to watch over it?”

Oberyn paused, and his eyes widened, as if just remembering Dark Sister’s existence.

“Ah,” Oberyn responded, slowly. He scratched his clean-shaven chin. “Hmm.”

“Yes,” Jon deadpanned. “‘Ah. Hmm’”

A part of him, one beaten down at Winterfell, was appalled with the way he spoke to this man; this
highborn prince. But Oberyn Martell had no interest in formality, and even less interest in false
sentiments. Spending weeks together had shown Jon that he could fully be himself; he didn’t have to
restrain his tongue, like he’d been trained to do with most people. And he didn’t have to be on guard
for scorn.

Oberyn tapped his fingers on his spear, contemplative. Then he released a great sigh. “Get the sword
and come.”

“What?”

Oberyn rolled his eyes, turning to walk leisurely back the way he’d come. “You did wish to see
Braavos, yes? Hurry.”

Jon hesitated; a part of him wanted to be difficult and refuse. But the greater part wanted to see this
strange city up close. He ran to the cabin, carefully extracted Dark Sister, and slung its covered form
over his back.

They walked though the city for three hours. First, they stopped at the market, with its rows and rows
of stands, set up against the shade of the tall buildings, and covered in festive canopies. For supper,
they ate oysters bathed in vinegar, fresh bread made stuffed with herbs and spices, skewers of grilled
chicken covered in honey, water sweet wine, and a small lemon pie. Oberyn showed him the city,
passing though areas with small houses, with red doors, blue doors, green doors. The occasional
manse, with their high walls and trees heavy with fruit. They moved from island to island, leisurely
walking as the sun fell.
There was music aplenty and good cheer. Mummeries were held on the streets, with groups of only two or three, or large productions, in their own empty square, with stands and masks and colourful costumes. They stopped at one telling the tale of the flight of the original Braavosi, who were led here by the moonsingers’s visions on their quest to escape the enslavement of the ancient dragonlords. Jon was fascinated by the story, but they’d gotten there too late to see the beginning, and they be gone before the next repetition.

Oberyn showed him much of the city, particularly the most famous parts. The Canal of Heroes, lined with statues of past Sealords, each holding a carving of something to represent their reign. The temples, flanked tall statues of their gods. Moonsingers, R’hollor, Faith of the Seven…countless more, which Oberyn pointed out and explained.

Braavos was like the coalition the world, inviting all to stay, feast, and worship. All but slavers: the mightiest of the Free Cities was famous for it’s hatred of slavery.

Jon wondered if Daenerys would enjoy this place. He wondered if she’d want to spend hours just exploring, or maybe shopping in the market, or perhaps she preferred staying indoors like Lady Catelyn and Sansa, doing whatever highborn women did.

Would they even have anything in common? What would they talk about? Letters were one thing, but what would they do, day to day? Would they get on?

At that moment, they passed a stand selling metal pins, and his eye caught one encased protectively in glass. It was in the shape of a dragon, similar to the images he’d seen in his history books. The pin was inlaid with small red stones, which shimmered in the sun. The dragon was in mid flight, jaw just parted, and Jon imagined a scene of it mid battle, about to rain fire down upon its enemies. He must have stared at it too long, because the merchant took it out of the glass and showed it to him.

“Beautiful, yes? Ten coins! You are Westerosi, I see. It comes from King’s Landing, before the Rebellion. Such art there use to be!”

Jon felt a pang of sorrow. There were many pins in the store, but it was the sole one in the form of a dragon. He was about to turn away, when Oberyn handed the man coins, and took the pin. Then he gave it to Jon and walked away. The squire hurried after, protesting.

“Wait, but I—"

“A dragon all alone in a foreign land. A shame, do you not agree?” Oberyn said over his shoulder, without pausing.

Jon hesitated, looking down at the lone pin, then back at the stand. A dragon all alone. He clenched his free hand. Then, he carefully put the pin inside his breast pocket, and caught up with Oberyn.

*Will she like it?*

They kept walking, this time in silence. Oberyn was in an unusually sober mood, and Jon wondered if the pin had some symbolism to him, as well. A dragon pin in Braavos.

They were hours away from the harbor; they been walking in a relatively straight path across the city. Jon looked behind him, but he could no longer see the Titan through the fog. Did Oberyn plan to wander all night?

“Where are we going?”

“To call in a favor owed,” he replied.
Gradually, his mood lightened, and he began pointing out buildings again. At one point, they passed the massive structure that housed the Iron Bank. Entire regimes had fallen to the bank’s vengeance. If you borrowed, you paid; one way or another.

At dusk, when the Titan roared—as it did to mark the sunrise and sunset, as well as the approach of a ship—Jon saw the people making their ways indoors, as if one entity, and locking them tightly. He’d noticed the phenomenon from the ship, and found it odd.

“Why do they all go inside at this time? The streets empty within moments.”

“The night is the time of courtesans and swords. Any man found in the streets after moonrise is prepared for pain or pleasure. And all who carry weapons declare themselves eager for battle.” Oberyn grinned, bloodthirsty. “Ah, how I love Braavos.”

Jon glanced at Dark Sister on his back, and Oberyn’s spear, and sighed in annoyance. He should have known there was some catch to this trip. Jon tensed, looking around them suspiciously, as if an armed man would suddenly pop out of the darken spaces between buildings and attack. But in the end, no one bothered them in the few moments it took them to reach their destination. They ended up before the Sea Lord’s massive palace, which was opposite the moon pool, filled with sweet water that was brought from the mainland.

Oberyn neared the palace, and after speaking with a man, they were admitted inside. Jon tensed; he had no wish to meet the Sea Lord, and didn’t understand why Obeyrn had brought them here. But instead of going into the massive entrance hall, they took a side passage, lit with sconces carved like fish. They stopped before a door inscribed with flowing water surrounding a pair of slender blades.

The man who answered Oberyn’s knock was skinny, tanned, and had a prominent, hawked nose. He was baled, with small eyes, and thin lips. When he spied Oberyn, he cursed and tried to push the door closed, but Oberyn held it open, grinning.

“Come now, Syrio. Is this how you greet an old friend?”

The responding scowl made Jon very much doubt that anything resembling friendship existed between these two. “Martell. When I heard rumour of a fight at the Titan’s Inn, I had a terrible premonition. Why must I forever be correct?”

Jon shot Oberyn an exasperated look, but the man just grinned, unrepentant. “How was I to know that Aryol would take such insult at my casual words? His skin is much thinner than I recall. And the men who joined in…well, who I am to deny them entertainment?”

With a sigh of annoyance, Syrio stepped aside and allowed them entry. Oberyn sauntered in cheerfully, while Jon was more hesitant. He looked around, curious of this man who lived in the Sea Lord’s palace. It was a large room, but sparsely furnished. Only a small bed, nightstand, desk, and wardrobe. On one wall there was half a dozen swords, blades thinner than he’d ever seen, placed carefully upon narrow shelves. The center of the room was empty.

“Jon Snow, meet Syrio Forel, the First Sword of Braavos. Syrio, this is my squire.”

Jon nodded in greeting, tense as he always was around strangers, but the man simply nodded once before focusing on Oberyn. “I have not seen you in seven years, but you do not fool me. A Martell always has something planned. What brings you to me?”

Oberyn walked over to the bed and sat, completely at ease. Jon hovered awkwardly by the door, while Syrio strode over to his desk and sat, arms and legs crossed.
“You owe me a favour, my friend. You see, broody boy, Syrio once fell in love with a beautiful woman, although she did not share his regard.”

Jon shifted, uncomfortable hearing such personal story, but Syrio only sighed, mildly annoyed.

“He declared before all the world that she was more beautiful than the Nightingale, and that is simply not done in Braavos.”

“Says the man who makes it a sport!” Syrio snapped.

Jon almost rolled his eyes. Sometimes he wondered how Oberyn had managed to lived so long.

Oberyn’s grin was vicious. “Yes, but I desire the fight. You see, boy, such a proclamation invites vengeance from the Braavosi. Many will seek to kill you for slighting the Nightingale, a courtesan hailed as the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Jon just blinked. What a strange custom.

“When he was surrounded by enemies, nearly fifteen years ago, I happened to be in Braavos with my mercenary company. It was simply too good an opportunity, and I involved myself. Although I was amusing myself, he believed I was owed a debt, and swore to repay me.”

“That was before I knew him,” Syrio muttered, sighing. “Had I known before the man he was, I would have just taken my chances alone.”

“Ah,” Oberyn sighed, hand over his heart, “how you wound me!”

Syrio sneered, unimpressed. “Speak, what is it you want?”

“Only for you to spend this night instructing my squire on the water dance. He is talented, but lacks balance and patience.”

Jon turned to him, surprised. Oberyn had never said such a thing to him. He rubbed his arm, part self-conscious, part defensive.

Syrio turned to Jon, attentive for the first time. He scanned the young boy up and down, carefully, and then eyed the sword at his back.

“That is a longsword, yes? One you cannot wield at this age. The water dance is for thin, skinny blades.” He nodded to the swords on the wall. “I would have to adapt it. Come, show me the sword.”

Jon didn’t move, aware of just what he had strapped to his back. Oberyn may have some relationship with this man, but Jon didn’t trust him. Men would kill to get their hands on Valyrian Steel.

“Go ahead, broody boy. Syrio Forell is the last man to have an interest in riches.”

Syrio shot him an interested glance. Warily, Jon stepped forward and placed Dark Sister on the desk, and hesitated just a moment before uncovering it.

A sharp intake of breath was Syrio’s only response. He took the sword in hand and lifted it, testing the weight. Jon tensed, wanting to snatch it back, but Syrio immediately put it back down with a nod. “Yes, I can do this. How long are you in Braavos, Martell?”

Oberyn reclined back, lazy as a cat, and gave an unrepentant smile. “Sunrise. You have all night, Syrio. Let us see just how talented the first sword truly is.”
The look Syrio Forell shot him would have killed a weaker man. Oberyn merely lay down, head in his hand, and watched.

And so began the most exhausting eight hours of Jon Snow’s life.

“Remember,” Syrio snapped, hitting Jon’s bruised and aching wrist for the hundredth time. Unlike in the beginning, however, the dancing master didn’t succeed in making Jon lose hold of his practice blade. “You are water, not rock. You flow, you wait. Watch your opponent, what do his eyes say? Know what they do before they know, and you have won before the battle begins. Adapt, chance; water, not rock!”

Jon just glared at him, body throbbing from all the places he’d hit. He was so tired, that the ground was beginning to look inviting. It was sheer stubbornness keeping him on his feet. And he’d been stupid enough to think that a few hours loading a ship were strenuous.

He knew nothing.

For hours, Syrio taught him peculiar stances and movements, which at first seemed illogical, but soon Jon understood how useful they were. He could already picture how he’d use Dark Sister with these new movements. Unlike Ser Rodrick’s lessons, which focused on power, or Oberyn’s which were all about speed and cunning, Syrio’s style focused on balance and patience. Jon was slowly adopting parts of all three that worked well for him.

“Ah, there is not enough time!” Syrio exclaimed, frustrated. “I need days to properly teach you. Days! You have talent, true, but it is unrefined. And for all his skill, Martell is no proper teacher. He had the patience of a green boy with his first woman!”

Oberyn, who’d been napping on the bed, opened one eye, annoyed. “I teach more important lessons than stances and form. I teach survival.”

Syrio sneered at him. “You start from the middle, and work both backwards and forwards. That is why he had no balance; your dizzying style.”

“I had forgotten how tedious you are. This is why I did not want to bring him here,” Oberyn muttered. “Such a powerful force, guilt.”

Jon would really like it if they stopped discussing him like he wasn’t there. They’d been doing it for hours, as if Jon was simply a doll that existed for them to argue over. “It’s nearly dawn. We have to leave soon, or we won’t make it.”

Oberyn sat up and looked out the sole window, seeing that the moon was, in fact, low in the sky. Just over an hour until sunrise. They’d have to take a boat back to the harbor. Jon nearly groaned at the prospect of more movement. He just wanted to collapse and sleep for the rest of the week.

“Poor boy, stuck with this one,” Syrio muttered. “All that talent, butchered!”

Personally, Jon didn’t want any more eight-hour-long sessions. Not when Syrio’s idea of a reprimand was a smack to the offending body part. His bruises throbbed just thinking about it.

Oberyn turned back to them, tapping his fingers on his leg. It was something he did when contemplating an act, and Jon had learned to be wary of the behaviour.

“I have heard that you are leaving Braavos,” Oberyn began, standing to stretch.
Syrio was immediately suspicious. “It is true. Nine years as the First Sword has been excellent, but I am restless. It is time for me to look for other work.”

Oberyn nodded, scratching his chin. “You have discussed this with the Sealord?”

Syrio took Jon’s practice blade, and the boy just stumbled over to the chair, collapsing in it with a thankful sigh.

“He is sad to see me go, but he knows the truth. We Braavosi understand the call of the seas.”

Oberyn nodded, pleased. “Excellent. We leave at sunrise, for Westeros. Come along. Teach him during the voyage, and then we part ways at the Trident. The Summer Drift is heading all over Westeros and the Free Cities. You can remain on it until you chose a destination.”

They stared at him, shocked by the abrupt plan. Well, Syrio was shocked: Jon was just horrified by the idea of a whole week of this training. Why had he ever complained about lifting a bag of rocks a handful of times? He was a bloody fool!

“I cannot just leave!” Syrio protested. “There are plans to make, and farewells.”

Oberyn yawned, dismissive. “Send them notes, then. Braavosi understand, as you have said. And it is not like you need time to pack,” he motioned to the sparse room. “Say your farewells to those most important, and them come. We leave at dawn.”

Jon closed his eyes. The old gods had forsaken him; how else did he end up with the most impulsive man in the world? A tiny vein was throbbing at Syrio’s temple, as if he, too, was wondering the same thing.

Three hours later, the sun peeking over the horizon, the Titan of Braavos roared once more. The Summer Drift, along with a new passenger—much to Captain Savoy’s irritation—set sail for the Trident.

*****

The rest of the tournament passed without much drama. Gerold Dayne won the Essosi single combat on the second day, and was awarded with full plate armour for his House. Right after the melee, he’d publicly purchased aluminum plates, acknowledging before the world the weakness of iron. Many who could afford it had followed suit. A man from the Summer Islands won the archery competition, as well as aluminum plates for twenty men of his choosing. And Jaime Lannister won the joust, unseating a powerful rider from Volantis in a very close match. He’d crowned Daenerys as the Queen of Love and Beauty, announcing it as tribute for the House Baratheon of Dragonstone. But it was likely he’d have done it anyway; they were close, and Jaime Lannister paid no other woman any attention. Already, their relationship was being remarked upon.

For many people, these events were front and center, but for Eddard Stark, it was all background noise. He had too many other things on his mind to give the tourney it’s proper attention. He’d been confronted with many truths this trip. The heaviest of was the reality of his own blindness.

Ned was a man who judged too soon. Who assumed too much. He could no longer live his life in such a way. His wife, his eldest daughter, his son, even Jaime Lannister—all people he’d had ideas of in his mind, an understanding of he’d believed to be true. All these people who’d shocked him with their reality.
It took a small girl to tell him he had to listen to people more. Even if the moment had angered him—he was still a lord, and he had his pride—the truth of the words had hit hard.

Wildfire. Others take him, wildfire. He could no longer fault Jaime Lannister for breaking his oath; a compromise Ned Stark had never before dreamed he’d make. Oath breakers were in the wrong, always. That was how it was supposed to be. The world was supposed to be simple. The laws were obeyed, traditions honored, and life lived as it was supposed to be lived. In the end, everything would fall into place. Mortal plans—as his ambitious father had inadvertently taught him—were nothing but entertainment for the gods.

Live honorable, live truly, and your duty was fulfilled. This is how he wanted the world to be; this is how he’d governed himself and his family.

But the world was not simple, and never had been. He’d been living a half life since the Rebellion. He’d never truly woken up from the nightmare of losing most of his family. Ned Stark had been living in the past, living in his own world, and he could no longer continue to do so. He needed to start looking to the future, even if the very thought of it exhausted him. The Seven Kingdoms would not stop changing just because Ned Stark ignored them.

If a small girl of nine could face the truth of the world, rather than hide from it, then so could a grown man.

Winter is Coming. His house words. His entire life had narrowed on those words. He’d become a man so focused on suffering—past and future—that he’d ignored the small joys of the present.

No longer. It was time to return home.

Two days after the Tourney ended, he’d departed. Before leaving, he’d completed two final things.

His first order of business was to speak with Jaime Lannister.

“I do not absolve you of your sins, Ser Jaime. I still believe that you should have stopped Aerys as he fell to madness. But I…acknowledge that your loyalty was an oath fulfilled. Regardless, I maintain my belief that you should not be apart of the Kingsguard. It sets a dangerous precedent. But neither do you deserve the Wall. When the time came, you acted with honor.”

The young lion, with his deep green eyes, swallowed hard. “I’ll never like you, Stark. But…thank you.”

Ned took a breath, and nodded. Deep in his heart, he finally admitted the truth to himself. His hatred of Jaime Lannister was not truly due to his actions. Not because he’d broken his oath. Not because he’d slayed a king. No, Ned’s rage came from the simple fact that Jaime Lannister had stolen his revenge. His father, his brother…he’d been unable to avenge them. It should have been Ice that ended the Man King’s reign. That would have been justice. The son of scheming Tywin Lannister had stolen the wolf’s prey, for glory, he’d thought, and he had never forgiven the Jaime for it.

But learning the truth meant that, finally, he could lay his anger to rest.

“But learning the truth meant that, finally, he could lay his anger to rest.

“Fare thee well, Ser Jaime.”

“And you, Lord Stark.”

Second, he’d said his farewells to the House Baratheon of Dragonstone. With Stannis, he’d grasped elbows and shaken hands. There would be many letters more between them, as there had been for ten years. To lady Myra, he’d spoken of Jon; his son was not a man to harm another. She needn’t
fear for her ward’s safety with him. Ned doubted she believed his words. To little Steffon he’d spoken of his son, Bran, who was near to him in age. Perhaps one day, they could spar with each other.

To Daenerys Targaryen, he’d issued an open invitation to the North. In his domain, justice would always be served; be it for hightborn, lowborn, or bastards. Her actions would become known in the North. Her words. The Mad King’s shadow would not taint her happiness, as long as he, Robb, and Jon drew breath. She would be happy in her home, and welcome amongst his family.

The young girl, who’d been wan for days—even the crown of Love and Beauty had not cheered her—had finally smiled. He’d not minded her impulsive hug.

*My son’s happiness is in your capable hands, Daenerys Targaryen. Treat him well. He, too, has a gentle heart.*

And so, Ned Stark departed, his course set for Riverrun. It was time to make his family whole again.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, and this is the first chapter of Act 4 :D

Upon commenter recommendation, here is the official soundtrack for this chapter X..D https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jbp52Z9jRg0

Oh, and I forgot to explain a couple of things, for non-book readers.
1. [Old Nan’s tales of age old Kings, stolen daughters, and animals with human souls echoed in his ears.]
   Jon was remembering a story about how the Stark Family, thousands of years pre-canon, back when they were the Winter Kings, defeated the Warg King, who ruled Sea Dragon Point, during the conquest of the North. The Warg King was allied with the Children of the Forest, and his powerful blood allowed him to command all wolves. Lord Stark killed him, his sons, and took his daughter for his wives (I'm assuming by force). That's why the Starks have skinchanger (control any animal) abilities.

2. Syrio Forell served the Sealord nine years, and it's unknown why he left. I don't know if he was already in KL when Ned hired him, or just came for Braavos, but in this story, this is how he came to Westeros.
River's Regret

Chapter Summary

A dragon's stance, a bastard's rage, and a mother's regret.

Chapter Notes

Phew, this was an emotional chapter! It ended up longer than it was supposed to be.

I originally planned for three more scenes, but those will have to be for next chapter!
(Which won't be for a while, because exam season has begun....;_;)

Well, happy December! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dear Daenerys,

We’ve made it to the trident, finally. I apologize for the late response, but we stopped at Braavos along the way. The Prince was gone for most of the trip, but I’m not sure where. I met a sailor from the Summer Isles and saw a Fire Hawk. A massive black and red bird, although I was told it was still just an infant. Fire Hawks are long-lived, and it will take years for it to reach full size. The city was impressive, with densely packed buildings on dozens of islands linked by stone bridges. There is a large market, and the streets are filled with songs and mummeries. One day, we can travel there, if you like. I bought you a pin, although it’s too heavy to send my raven. Well, Prince Oberyn bought it, but I will pay him back. A man named Syrio Forel came to Westeros with us. He was the First Sword of Braavos, which is very impressive. He is teaching me a different sword style, called the Water Dance. He’s a strict teacher. We will part ways when we head south. He plans to find work in King’s Landing.

We’re staying at the Inn at the Crossroads, which lies, as named, at the crossroads between the Kingsroads and the River road. Prince Oberyn will take this letter to a nearby rookery, at House Darry, to be sent. Can you tell me all you know of House Darry? I know the Prince is here for a reason, but he ignores me when I ask. But knowing what we do about Princess Elia, I don’t think it’s a coincidence. Although sometimes I worry that I’m growing to paranoid. Prince Oberyn can do that to you.

How did the ore meeting go? Were the lords impressed? If so, Prince Oberyn is already planning to purchase some armor in the coming months. I think it’s a good idea; the Prince is talented, but impulsive. Arrogant, as well. I think it would be safer if he had armor between himself and the many people who want to kill him. He is a good man, the prince, but...difficult. I know you don’t like that word, but Prince Oberyn just can’t be described unless you meet him. Then you’ll understand.

What plans does Lord Stannis have now? Will you be going back to King’s Landing? Remain well.

Yours,
Dany read the letter for the third time. The first read had brought a smile to her face. He was so different now than in his first letter to her. Still polite, still a bit reserved, but more confident. She found that she liked it, although his occasional bouts of shyness made her smile in a different way.

But by the third time she read it, Dany found she was...jealous. She hated that she was, but it was true. She wanted to be there with him. She wanted to travel to Braavos and the Trident and so many other places. She wanted to see a Fire Hawk, and the pin he’d bought.

Instead, Cousin Stannis planned to take them back to King’s Landing by weeks end, and she’d have to deal with Joffrey and the queen and the Usur—and the king.

She glanced over at the window, where she’d placed the rose and carnation crown Jaime had given her at the tourney. Queen of Love and Beauty. It brought a smile to her face, a pride in her heart… but a small part of her wished he hadn’t done it. Myra’s response said she, too, was unhappy with the outcome. Daenerys didn’t think the people at King’s Landing would be kinder to her for it. Daenerys didn’t want them to—

The princess scowled suddenly, staring at the crown, with it’s slowly drying flowers. She surged to her feet and strode towards it. Daenerys picked it up and resolutely placed it on her head, chin raised in challenge.

What was she thinking? She was a dragon. She wouldn’t let people make her scared just because her friend had done a nice thing. Jaime rarely did nice things for anyone, and she wouldn’t throw this in his face. She turned back to the letter. And she wouldn’t be jealous of Jon’s good fortune! In the future, they would simply go back to Braavos together, and spend hours walking the streets, and seeing a Fire Hawk, and doing many other things!

Daenerys took a deep breath, and sat at her vanity, before the mirror. She met her own gaze, noting the dark rings underneath. She’d barely left her room since the Tourney’s end, nearly ten days ago. She been plagued with nightmares of what happened, or Tyene screaming, of Ser Clayton’s severed hand rolling towards her.

A terrible nightmare of her laughing, madness in her eyes, as the world around her burned.

Daenerys shivered, shoving the image away. It was just a dream. It wasn’t like the…other dears she sometimes had, the dreams that tried to lead her places, the dreams that told her what the future held. No, it was a normal dream that echoed her fears, not a premonition in disguise.

“I am not my father,” she whispered to her reflection, hands fisted, bloodless. “Not ever.”

No, the small girl hadn’t slept well at all, even with Tyene at her side. She’d let everything that happened weigh her down, bit by bit, until she’d felt just like that terrified young girl who’d hidden away in her room at King’s Landing for a whole month, doing nothing by crying. Jaime’s crown had sparked a small feeling of happiness; Lord Stark’s words had made her smile.

And Jon’s letter allowed her to breathe. He was like her. A boy raised in a place he’d never fully belong in. A boy shadowed by a title. He understands...doesn’t he?

She walked to her dresser and took out the last letter she’d written Jon, still unsent because she had no destination. She read over it, and her cheeks flushed in humiliation.
Impulsively, she took it to the hearth. *I can’t show him this. I can’t. I can’t let him see it!*

But when she tried to throw it in, when she tried to erase the pathetic words, she found she couldn’t.

Daenerys Targaryen stood there, before the comforting flame, and tears gathered in her eyes. She wanted to send this letter. But she didn’t. She wanted him to know it all. But she didn’t. Perhaps he would turn away from her. She knew he would. Perhaps he would run. She feared he would. But if she burned this letter, she’d never know. She would always wonder.

Maybe he’d understand…and maybe he wouldn’t.

Daenerys looked away from the flames, exhaling sharply in frustration. The possibility of his scorn shouldn’t worry her so much! She didn’t even know Jon Snow—not really. She had hopes for him, ideas pieces together by his letters, but in the end, Daenerys didn’t know him. She couldn’t depend on a stranger.

“*I am a dragon,*” she whispered to her reflection. “*I am their blood!*” A dragon cowered before no one. A dragon was not weak. A dragon did not depend on others, planted no trees. A dragon did not cry, waiting for someone to comfort it!

Enough was enough. She’d taken some time to be sad, she’d taken some time to be scared, but now it was enough. She’d demanded a man’s hand in payment, and she’d have to deal with that.

She would have to deal with the knowledge that she would do it again, if in the same position. She would have to deal with the rage inside her, that was always simmering under the surface. Daenerys was who she’d always been, she’d just learned more about herself; good and bad.

The world was as it had always been. She just knew more of the bad now, but that didn’t erase the good. Daenerys Targaryen would face it, like a dragon, and nothing would ever stand in her way. She would find her own happiness.

“And one day, I’ll go to Braavos and see a Fire Hawk *myself.*”

A dragon feared nothing. Certainly not a stranger’s response, betrothed or not.

“There will be honesty between us, Jon Snow. I promised.”

*Even if you hate what you find.*

*****

The Inn at the Crossroads, as it was known to the smallfolk, had a varied and interesting history. The large, three-storied structure was made of white stone and wood, had multiple balconies, and boasted dozens of rooms. Behind the Inn was a large barn, stables, and a bell tower, which chimed to mark the hours of the day. A crumbling stone wall had greeted Jon, Oberyn, and Syrio when they’d entered the yard.

It was first built hundreds of years ago during the reign of King Jaehaerys I Targaryen. Originally named the Two Crown—in honor of him and his wife, Queen Alysanne—the name had changed to the Bellringer Inn following the contraction of the clock tower, and then to the Clanking Dragon in honor of a black dragon sigil that use to hang over it prior to the first Blackfyre Rebellion. Finally, it had been dubbed the River Inn after Lord Darry, a loyal Targaryen supporter, had chopped up the black sign which had inadvertently become the sigil of House Blackfyre. But ever since the Trident river, which had once been right beside the Inn, moved, it simply became known as the Inn at the Crossroads.
Or so said the innkeeper, Masha Heddle; a large, middle-aged woman whose teeth were stained red. Jon didn’t know why her smile was that color, but he thought it probably had to do with the leaves she seemed to always be chewing and spitting out. He did know that the woman loved to talk, and had barely ceased telling him all about the Inn since they’d arrive four days ago. Jon wondered what this place would be called a hundred years from now, when they were all dead and other men and women stopped here for rest.

He also wondered if she knew he was a bastard and didn’t care, or if she just recognized the richness of his and Oberyn’s clothing and was extra attentive because of it.

Sitting beside Syrio at the end of a large wooden table, Jon looked around that the room as he ate his bread, rabbit stew, and lemon tart. Watered ale washed the hearty meal down. the whole first floor was a large room with wooden floors lined with large, sturdy tables, and a bar at the end. The kitchen was behind it, clattering with the sounds of meals being made. When they’d first stop here to stay and eat dinner, Jon was surprised by how bland he found all these common Northern dishes; he’d gotten used to the various spices the cook had packed into the meals eaten on the ship. Not to mention the richness of Braavosi food.

Winterfell’s food had been the same; filling but bland. He hadn’t noticed or cared until then—a Northerner didn’t need to fancy trappings of the south. But Jon didn’t think it was a bad idea to add a little spice to a meal, although he felt a bit like a traitor for thinking such a thing. But he knew very well how resistant Northerners were to change.

Jon knew one person, at least, who would appreciate the variation. His uncle Benjen, who had returned to Moat Cailin a week before Jon had departed with Oberyn. While staying at the Moat those two months, Jon had learned that his uncle enjoyed trying new and strange things; it was why he was so enamored with the crannogmen. At times, Jon wished Benjen could have come with them—he’d definitely have enjoyed the places they’d been—but he knew his uncle was busy at the Moat.

Jon finished his food and got up. He strapped Dark Sister to his back and waved at Syrio. “I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

“Go, go,” Syrio motioned, eating much more leisurely. The slight man did everything slowly, smoothly, and carefully: as if his swordplay was a lifestyle, rather than a collection of stances and movements. Jon used the water dance; Syrio was a water dancer. The young boy often wondered what it would be like to be that passionate about something.

Everything in his life was already decided for him. Even sword fighting. While he was talented at it; while he enjoyed it, in the end it was just a necessary skill dictated by his father and Lord Stannis. Jon had never had a choice in the matter. He’d never had room to…be something he’d chosen for himself.

He would be a lord, but he wasn’t born to it, like Robb was.

He would be a husband, but it was something given to him, not earned.

He would be a knight, possibly, but even that was founded on someone’s plot.

Jon Snow’s life had never been his own. However, despite how he sometimes protested, he knew he would never rebel.

Perhaps that’s what differentiated men from boys: choosing duty over desire.

Jon Snow would follow in his father’s footsteps.
With these brooding thoughts in mind, Jon took the back entrance, a narrow hallway beside the kitchens, and made his way to the stables. He’d convinced Masha to let him pay off his room by caring for the visitors’ horses and cleaning the stables. Not only was he more comfortable with the staying at the inn, knowing he was working for his share, but it was also a convenient way to avoid Syrio’s lessons.

Jon appreciated the things he’d learned; water dancing had become a major part of his personal style. Oberyn had been right, although he’d never admit it aloud to the boastful man; Jon had lacked balance and patience. Syrio’s lessons had gone a long way in curbing those bad habits. But that didn’t mean Jon liked training from dawn to dusk, until he was near the brink of exhaustion. Syrio had made it his personal mission to ensure Jon’s talent wasn’t ‘wasted by the Martell idiot,’ and that apparently meant that breaks were optional.

Jon thought it was also that Syrio had nothing better to do, and their lessons were a source of entertainment for the older man. Either way, Jon’s body was littered with bruises from his teacher’s strict lessons. The Braavosi was passionate about his water dance, and the idea that someone else was not as enamored with it was alien to him. Thankfully, Jon was picking it up quickly, and Syrio had less and less issues with his form every day.

Jon got to the stables just as a group of men arrived at the inn. They saw him there, handed him their horses with instructions stable them, then walked away. Jon assumed they were highborn.

He spent the next hour caring for the horses. He cooled them down by walking them around the stables a few times, gave them water from the nearby pump, brushed their coats, and stabled them in clean stalls with fresh hay. Then Jon cleaned off the bit and saddle and put them away. At Winterfell, he’d grown use to this routine, since at times the stable boys decided to ignore him by pretending to be too busy with Robb and Theon’s horses. Still, it was a relaxing routine, and he rather enjoyed the simplicity.

Had he remained with his mother, what would have become of him? Would he have entered into a trade? Would he have become a stable boy?

*Or would I live in the southernmost kingdom, with a highborn family who wouldn’t care that I wasn’t trueborn?*

Sometimes, traveling with the Dornish prince, he could see that life so clearly that it almost hurt.

But then, if his mother was… Ashara Dayne—even thinking her name was strange to him—then she was dead, and perhaps her relatives wouldn’t be as kind to him as Oberyn assumed the Dornish were. Besides, Jon Snow was of the North: Ned Starks son in looks and temperament. How would he have lived in the strange kingdom that created men like Oberyn Martel? Who would he have become?

A noise by the entrance broke him from his thoughts, and Jon realized he’d been brushing a young mare’s mane for many minutes, although the horse didn’t seem to mind. He quickly moved on, glancing once over his shoulder. A boy just a few years older than him entered the stables, leading a dapple gray destrier, with a long white mane and tail. The horse was lined with muscle, and its coat shined. An expensive, well-cared for animal, built for races and jousts.

Jon tried to get a look at the boy, who was taller than he by at least a head, but the sunlight shining behind him blocked his features. He walked straight and confidently; a highborn son, this one.

Jon put down his brush and walked out of the stall, prepared to take the horse and care for it. The beast was panting as if it had been ridden hard. But when he went to take the reigns, the boy shook
his head.

“No, I can care for Shadow myself. I’m only looking for a pail to water him.”

Jon looked up, surprised at the strong Northern accent. The men who frequented this Inn were usually of the Riverlands, sometimes the Vale.

Jon’s stomach instantly roiled. Had he met this boy before? Was he a son of one of his father’s bannermen? Jon had few fond memories of those visits; they generally liked to play friendly with Robb and gawk at his bastard brother when the trueborn son wasn’t looking. His eyes flicked over the boy, but he was wearing a long cloak that hid any House sigil.

Jon turned away and handed him an empty bucket, keeping his head lowered. He didn’t need a confrontation, especially not when it would likely get back to his father. He was sure the story would blame Jon, no matter what the truth was. He couldn’t bring shame to Winterfell.

“Thanks,” the boy said. His gratitude surprised Jon. He turned to leave, and Jon relaxed, before stopping. “Say, could you tell me where the best grazing grounds around here are? Shadow needs some grass to even out his diet.”

Jon released a quiet exhale. He’d tried.

“No, I’ve only been here a few days myself.” He couldn’t help the defensiveness to his tone. “You’ll have to ask the innkeeper.”

“You’re Northern,” his tone was surprised. “And you speak as if highborn. What’s your name, boy?”

*You’re a much a boy as I am.* “Jon. Jon Snow.”

“Lord Stark’s bastard!”

Jon grit his teeth, tensing. The elder boy took a step closer and angled himself so that his face was finally illuminated. He was handsome—the type Sansa would chatter about—with long, straight black hair and eerie pale grey eyes. Jon felt like he’d seen him before, but where…?

Suddenly remembering, Jon’s stomach dropped. Only one Northern lord had eyes like his.

*Roose Bolton.*

If there was one man who made Jon Snow nervous, it was he. Despite his plain face and mild-mannered voice, the man always stared at Jon with a strange light in his eyes. The young boy had not even needed a moment of deliberation before rejecting Lord Bolton’s offer to foster him. The guards whispered tales of cruelty about the Dreadfort and its lord; tales of punishments that made Jon’s stomach turn. Although amicable Robb had been surprised by Jon’s admittance of not liking the man.

“A good lord has to punish criminals, Jon,” *Robb had responded when told of the stories.* “And you know the guards always exaggerate.”

But Ned, too, seemed to dislike the other lord. Jon remembered one time when he and Robb were sparring under Ned’s watchful gaze, and a guard has informed the Lord of Winterfell of Lord Bolton’s arrival. His father’s face grew even grimmer than normal, lips pressed together tightly.

“You’re Domeric Bolton,” Jon said.
“Aye.”

Jon stiffened, waiting for something to happen. But the other boy only said. “Lord Horton knew Lord Stark and the King when they were boys. He tells his sons and I stories.”

“Lord Horton?” Jon questioned, frowning. He knew no Northern Lord by that name.

“Aye, Lord of House Redfort. I squire for him at the Eyrie,” Domeric responded. “This is my third year with him. What are you doing here? Last I heard, you were going to be fostered.”

Since the other boy had so far made no moves against Jon, he slowly relaxed.

“I squire for Prince Oberyn Martell,” Jon responded, and he couldn’t keep the pride out of the words. The Northmen may not like the Dornish, but no man could doubt Oberyn’s skill at war. “We’re on our way south to Dorne.”

Domeric’s eyes widened. “Prince Oberyn! He’s here?” There was a youthful excitement in his voice, and Jon smiled. “I’ve heard he’s won dozens of tourneys, and that he can ride like the wind. Is it true?”

Before Jon could respond, Domeric’s horse gave a whinny and bent his head down to nose the empty bucket in his master’s hand. Domeric pushed his head away, and took hold of the reins. “Alright, alright, I’ll get you’re your water,” he laughed.

Domeric smiled at Jon. “Take a break; I’ve not had company my own age since we left the Eyrie. Do you ride?”

“Aye,” Jon replied, hesitant. Domeric Bolton was…unexpected. But a part of Jon was still waiting for the inevitable snide remark, some indication that Domeric looked down upon him. But so far, besides calling him Ned’s bastard, the older boy seemed perfectly comfortable around Jon.

“Good, saddle your horse—you do have one?”

Jon nodded.

“Then come out and meet me by the pump; we can find some grazing grass.” With that, Domeric turned and led his horse away, patting him.

Jon looked after him for many moments, hesitant. Domeric Bolton, the son of a man who made Jon nervous. True, the son didn’t share he’s father’s strange gaze, but he was still unknown to Jon. Part of him urged to ignore the invite.

But eventually, his curiosity drove him to comply. He, too, hadn’t had a companion his near age since leaving Winterfell. Besides, he would be a Northern lord one day; a bannerman, alongside Domeric. It didn’t hurt to see what type of man the other was. He could tell Robb of this boy they’d never met.

I should send Robb a letter, Jon thought, a bit guilty. He hadn’t sent one since Castle Black. Every time he tried, it was like no words would come.

Jon went out to notify another stable boy of his break, and told Syrio as well. On his way back out, he hesitated, and then went up to the room. He took out a dagger Oberyn had given him, and tied it to his leg. Better to be paranoid than find oneself in danger without protection. Then Jon saddled his garron, which was a lot smaller than Domeric’s destrier. But his horse was bred for travel and endurance, while the young Bolton’s was built for war.
He joined the other boy by the well, where his horse was finishing his drink. Domeric cupped one hand under the water and quenched his own thirst. Jon waited, and filled his flask with water as well. Domeric eyed the sword at Jon’s back, but didn’t say anything.

Then boys got on their horses and set out, heading south towards the river. “Tell me, is the Prince as skilled as they say?”

Jon nodded. “We went north first, towards the Wall. He’d never seen it before. On the way to Eastwatch by the Sea, we came across a pack of Wildlings. He killed five of them within moments, and the other two…fled. None of his opponents managed to touch him.”

Jon didn’t mention that the Wildlings had all been young, some Jon age; it sounded more impressive this way. The other boy whistled, impressed. “Where is he now? We arrived earlier, but I didn’t see a Dornishman.”

Jon hesitated. “He’s sending some letters. He should be back by weeks end.”

Three days, give or take. Oberyn had disappeared early in the morning, taking Jon’s letter with him. Once again, the prince eluded Jon’s efforts to understand his plans. What was House Darry’s role? Did they even have one?

Domeric nodded. He looked excited but was trying to pretend he wasn’t. Jon understood that; he’d felt it when he’d first met Oberyn.

They spent an hour racing. Domeric always won, and Jon got the feeling it would have been so even had Jon been atop a destrier himself. The other boy was a superb horseman; his form was perfect, and it was like he and the horse were of one body. At one point, Domeric jumped a fallen log so tall that Jon knew had he attempted such, he’d have evened up broken or dead.

Domeric Bolton was an expert rider, and the huge grin on his face let Jon know that he truly loved it. Once again, another person who’d found something they were passionate about.

A couple of hours later, they found some glass in a small valley at the base of the mountains. They dismounted to let their horses graze, and sat under a large oak tree. Jon took a drink of water, and offered some to Domeric, who shook his head. He took out his own flask, but the smell let Jon know it was stronger than mere water. Remembering the brew Xhobar gave him, which was amongst his things at the Inn, Jon refused Domeric’s offering. He’d rather seem like a green boy than prove he was by coughing in response to some other burning liquid.

He noticed Domeric eyeing the sword at Jon’s back. “Why do you carry that? A longsword, aye?”

Jon tensed. Dark Sister suddenly felt heavier on his back. “It was a gift. From my Lord Father,” he added on, although he didn’t like telling untruths.

Domeric took the hint that Jon didn’t want to speak of it, and shrugged.

The boys talked about their childhoods. Domeric hadn’t been some since he was seven, besides a few visits. He’d spent four years as a page in Barrowton to his aunt, Barbrey Dustin. Then he was sent to the Vale to squire for Lord Horton Redfort. Now at fifteen, Domeric had already done so much more than Jon ever had.

Jon told him of Winterfell, where he’d been only once, as a young boy. They’d apparently met before, but Jon had been too young to remember it.

“You’re headed back home, then?” Jon asked.
“Aye. Lord Redford had business nearby, so he came along as well.”

Jon tried to remember the group of men who’d handed him their horses, but couldn’t remember details besides beards, coast hair, and dark cloaks.

“He’ll knight me before we part,” Domeric said, pride in the words. “No one has said it, but I know father plans to take me home and continue teaching me about being Lord of the Deadfort.”

There was a hint of melancholy in his voice.

“Do you not wish to return home?” Jon hedged. Then he silently cursed himself; what a tactless question!

Domeric looked surprised, but not angry. He hesitated. “That’s not it. It has been a long time, and I long for home. However, I have no siblings. For years now, I have been amongst Lord Horton’s sons, and come to consider them brothers. A successful fostering,” he joked, weakly. Domeric took another swig of his flask. “I suppose I will miss the company.”

Jon paused at that. His earliest memories were of playing with Robb in Winterfell’s courtyard; of racing him, of pretending to be knights and heroes of old. They’d spent every day of their lives together, until Jon had left with Oberyn Martell. Even Theon, for all his unpleasantness, had occasionally been companionable. Jon sometimes awoke expecting to see Robb. Strangely, missing his brother made writing letters to him awkward.

He couldn’t even imagine what his life would have been like without Robb in it. Would he, too, have longed for siblings?

“Do you love your trueborn brother?” Domeric asked. “Even if he is the heir, and you will never be? Everyone tells me that bastards are not to be trusted.”

Jon shot him a look, teeth clenching. The slight was so unexpected, it pierced all the deeper for it. Had Domeric been playing some game this whole time? For what reason? “Yes,” Jon snapped. “Trueborn or not, Robb is my brother. I know it may be surprising to hear that a bastard can care about something other than power.”

He pushed to his feet, scowl in place. He would leave this highborn lordling, and never think of him again. He should have expected this. No one would ever see Jon as more than a bastard.

“I’ve heard rumour that my father has a bastard,” Domeric called out. “A son.”

Jon didn’t pause, he just made his way toward the horse. What did he care for Roose Bolton’s infidelities?

“I plan to see him out when we return. I will ask father to being him into our home. So that we may truly be brothers.”

Jon jerked to a halt. He looked over his shoulder, wide-eyed. Domeric was looking down, ripping out bits of grass uncertainly. “My father bids me not to do so. But this stronger is my blood,” Domeric looked up, almost in challenge.

Jon understood then. Domeric Bolton wanted to know if Jon, who was also a bastard, loved his trueborn brother. Or if he resented him. He wanted to know what to expect.

Jon turned back around, deliberating. “I can’t speak for all bastards,” he began, careful. “But Robb is my brother, and I would do nothing to harm him. Or any of my half-siblings. Even a bastard had
honor.” That last part he said with a hint of challenge.

Domeric looked up, and there was relief on his face. Jon wonder how long he’d deliberated going to his brother. He wondered what choice he’d have made.

They spend another hour at the clearing, sharing stories of their pasts, and Jon began to genuinely like Domeric. While he was highborn, and did share many of their views on those below them, he was also thoughtful and spoke carefully. And it seemed that unlike most, he had little issue with Jon’s status. A man who would seek out a bastard brother in hopes of being a family was not one who had much issue with those born outside of wedlock.

As they were riding back, they came across a group of three unarmed men. They were laughing loudly and jeering. Jon looked closer and saw that a peasant man and his young son or grandson were surrounded by the group, and one of the men had taken a pouch from them. Jon assumed it was gold they had stolen. The boy was trying to get it back, but was held away cruelly by the hair, while the older man was pleading with them.

Jon scowled, rage building.

He made to urge his horse towards them, but Domeric stopped move in front of him.

“Leave it alone, Jon,” the older boy said, tone reasonable. “There are three of them. Besides, they’re only peasants. An old man and boy had no business traveling around unprotected.”

Jon shot him a fierce glare. Domeric blinked in surprise.

“You’re going to be a knight,” Jon accused. “Your vows are to protect the weak.”

Domeric frowned, anger gathering at his brow. “Only an idiot takes on three men. And you’re unarmed—that sword is too big for you!”

At that moment, one of the men pushed the older man to the ground. He fell hard, with a pained cry. The young boy screamed.

Jon took out the dagger he had hidden. “Not unarmed.”

He rode around Domeric before the other could stop him, and charged toward the group. The men turned, hearing him, and Jon used his momentum to kick the closest one across the face. He went down with a grunt, holding his nose and bellowing in pain. He was the one who’d pushed the older man down.

The other two were distracted, and Jon ordered their victims to rum. The boy escaped his hold, and ran toward the older man. “Grandpa! Come on!”

The elder shook his head, and looked to Jon, beseeching. “Please, the money. It’s all we have!”

Jon saw that one of the assailants still had the bag, and nodded.

“You little shit!” The man he kicked snapped, holding his bleeding face. “You broke me nose!”

They ran at Jon, murder in their eyes. He tried to avoid it, but one of the men grabbed him and yanked him off his horse. He hit the ground with a pained grunt, and barely managed to keep hold of the knife. Before he could scramble up, one of them tried to punch him. Jon dodged and took the opportunity to drive his dagger into the man’s leg.
He shrieked and went down. Blood covered Jon’s hand.

One of the others bellowed in anger, and kicked Jon’s hand so hard that his bones rattled, and the dagger was dislodged. He scrambled to grab it, but the other assailant picked it up.

Jon met his eyes, and the man smiled, his teeth bloody. “I’ll teach ya not to pick fights with valemen.”

He slashed down, and Jon jerked away in time to avoid a cut to his face, but his shoulder was grazed. White hot pain pierced him, like nothing he’d ever felt before. He released an involuntary cry of pain.

Heart pounding, read fear began to creep in. Jon tried to kick the man away, but he was too big. One of his friends delivered a brutal blow to Jon’s side, and he screamed. Just as the first man raised the knife again, he was rammed from behind by Domeric’s destrier.

Jon heard a snap as he went down. His assailant released a horrible shriek.

“Heard ya!” Domeric ordered, and Jon scrambled to obey.

He looked around, dazed, his shoulder burning and his side throbbing. One man was one the ground, clutching his bleeding thigh, while another was unconscious, his arm at an odd position. The third man, who was holding the money, looked around, then turned to run. With a burst of speed, Jon caught up and tackled him to the ground. They hit the hard dirt with a pained grunt. Jon drove his knee into the man’s back, keeping him in place, and grabbed his head.

With both hands, Jon pulled hard on the man’s greasy hair, and then smashed his head down to the ground. He did it again. And again. Rage, like he’d never before experienced, permeated his being. How dare these men attack those weaker than them?

Blood began to splatter, and the man stopped struggling to get away. But Jon didn’t stop.

He only let go when an arm grabbed him from behind yanked him away. Jon threw an instinctive punch, before realizing it was Domeric. “Enough! He’s already unconscious, Jon! Enough!”

Jon startled, freezing completely. His chest filled with ice.

He looked down at the man, who’s ruined face was turning the ground red, and then at his own hands. He swallowed, hard. He couldn’t quite look Domeric in the eye.

He reached down and took the pouch of coins from the man’s limp fingers, and turned towards the elder and young boy. They were staring at him, pale, eyes wide in fear. Jon’s stomach clenched.

He threw the bag towards them. The boy flinched and scrambled to catch it.

“Hire a guard next time,” Jon snapped, hating they way they continued to stare. He’d done it for them.

They scrambled away.

Jon turned away from Domeric, intending to get his horse and leave. That’s when he noticed the dozen figures over the hill, where he and Domeric had just been. Jon’s breath left him as the leader drew closer, and Jon saw the man’s pale, eerie eyes.

“Father!” Domeric exclaimed, confirming Jon’s suspicions.
Roose Bolton eyed the carnage with little emotion. When the looked Jon up and down, lingering on his bloody hands, his lips curled, ever so slightly.

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Catelyn Tully had spent the weeks since Sansa and Robb had arrived thinking of the past. It seemed like the only thing she ever did anymore. Riverrun had no need of her. Her father barely wanted to look at her, and only scolded when he did. Her brother was gone to the same place as Ned, but he’d be too great a coward to even speak to the Lord of Winterfell, of that she was sure. Robb still had a lingering distrust of her, and spent most of his time with the other boys, fighting and playing. Sansa was nearly always with the Septa, and Catelyn found herself too tired to listen to Mordane’s sermons. And Arya escaped the woman whenever she could, and Catelyn had grown tired of lecturing her, and getting angry looks in return. Only Bran, her sweet baby boy, was a comfort. At three, he didn’t understand anything around him, he was happy, especially with his elder siblings around. Bran was her light.

Yet sometimes, when Catelyn looked upon her youngest, with his bright auburn hair and blue eyes, she remembered another boy, only his hair was dark, and eyes Stark grey. In those moments, Catelyn couldn’t bare to look at her son.

When Ned first brought Jon Snow home, she’d been enraged at her husband, shamed by him. Her anger had been hot, blazing, and self-righteous. She had no loved for Ned Stark then; she’d bitterly regretted being forced to wed him, when it should have been her beloved Brandon by her side. Instead, she was stuck with a husband who brought his bastard home and insisted upon treating him the same as his trueborn son. She would not have cared if he had ten, twenty, a hundred bastards; as long as he respect his wife enough to keep them away.

Instead, he'd brought Jon to Winterfell, situated him in Robb's nursery, and would not hear one word spoken against his unorthodox behaviour. He'd shamed her by not only inferring that he valued both his sons equally, but that he valued Jon's mother more. She, Catelyn Tully, raised to be the perfect lady, was put on the same level as some nameless stranger. Everyone would laugh at her, mock her, think it her fault: for Ned Stark was a man of honor and could do no wrong.

What act have I committed to deserve this slight?!

For many moons, she could not bear to even look at him. This man she'd been forced to marry, who made her a mockery of the realm.

But as her anger cooled, as her bitterness diminished, she’d slowly gotten over the slight. Once, when visiting Robb in the nursery, she’d paused beside Jon Snow’s crib, and looked down at the serious little boy, his face scrunched even in sleep. She’d felt a reluctant warmth in her heart. Catelyn Tully was no monster; she could not hate a babe.

I could love him, she’d thought, looking down at his tiny form. I could raise him beside Robb, a loyal brother. I could mend his bastard's evil.

Family, Duty, Honor.

Yes, she’d decided. She could care for her husband’s bastard. After all, it was not like they were bound in love, so the betrayal did not cut her personally. Most of her rage was a wounded pride, to be so shamed before all the realm.

However, slowly, over the months they spent together, she’d reluctantly began to care for her quiet, somber husband. His strength, his resolve, his honor. The strength for which he loved his son. The
power with which he commanded his people, the respect they had for him.

*I'm this man's wife.* She’d once thought, staring at him during a meeting of the lords. She’d been oddly breathless, her palms wet, her heart beating. It was the first time she’d felt *desire* for him. When they had conceived Robb, those two weeks after her wedding, she’d done her duty, and felt little but discomfort. Some attraction, of course; her husband had been a handsome, considerate man.

But thoughts of Brandon had never been far from her mind. Brandon, with his quick smiles and open confidence. Brandon, who spoke so eloquently, who whispered naughty things in her ear that made her blush and giggle. Brandon, her love. *That's* who should have taken her maidenhead, not his quiet, boring brother.

But the more she’d gotten to know Ned, the more thought of Brandon had faded. One day, Catelyn Tully had realized she’d fallen in *love* with her husband. It had been a shock to her, because her emotions were so different compared to those she felt for Brandon. They were not loud and brash and overwhelming. Her love for Ned was quiet, strong, enduring.

*My love for him is real.*

But the more she fell in love with her husband, the less she was able to look at Jon Snow. Until one day, all she felt when she happened upon the babe was a jealousy so cutting, it nearly stole her breath.

*I love Ned. But does he love me?*

Ned Stark was a quiet, serious man. He’d never spoken such sentiment to her. She always got the feeling that he was doing his *duty*, even when he came to her bed and spilled himself inside of her.

He cared for her. He respected her. He never treated her ill. But Catelyn Tully never got the sense that he *loved* her; not as she’d grown to love him.

And that made Jon Snow the target of her rage. Or, more specifically, his absent mother, the women who could sway the implacable Eddard Stark away from his duty; who had stained the Lord of Winterfell’s honor. Who was such a woman, who could drive Honorable Ned to such passions, that he lay with her while unwed, and then acknowledged her son before all the realm?

Who was this woman, who’d stolen her husband's heart?

That’s when she’d begun hearing whispers of Lady Ashara Dayne, reputedly the most beautiful woman in Westeros, and the only woman Ned Stark had danced with.

*She was highborn, as am I. More beautiful. He chose her, and was forced to wed me. She perished, and Ned Stark’s heart died with her.* Or so some rumours said.

Catelyn could no longer contemplate loving another woman’s son. Especially not a woman who still held her husband in her thrall, in a way Catelyn never would.

She’d grown more and more jealous, until she’d finally found the courage to ask him. Ned had grown so angry, like she’d never before thought possible. She did not know he *had* that level of emotion, about *anything*.

*“He is my blood!”* Ned roared, eyes enraged. Catelyn flinched back, shaken and terrified. *“That is all you ever need to know! You will never speak of the late Lady Dayne again, Catelyn!”*

It had been the only time her husband frightened her. He’d silenced all the rumors after that, and
refused to speak to her for days afterward. Catelyn had never dared question him again.

And she became positive that this woman was in fact Jon Snow’s mother. Only she, who held such a large place in his heart, could have swayed him. She was the woman he’d wanted to marry, before this war tore everything to shreds.

Ned killed Arthur Dayne, returned his sword to Starfall, and returned with a child. And the Lady Ashara took her own life.

It made sense to Catelyn. If her love and the father of her child had murdered her family, she did not think she could bear the pain of it, either. That did not diminish her hatred for Ashara, a woman so beloved that Ned refused to even speak of her. A woman who could evoke in him more emotion than Catelyn ever had. Because he’d loved Ashara, while Catelyn he wed out of duty.

Those emotions festered, growing stronger and more poisonous every day, and found the only one outlet available: the woman’s son.

_The boy who looks Stark...and is older than my Robb. The quiet, queer child, who always observed everything like a terrifying shadow._

At first, she only ignored him. She listened to Septa Mordane, who reinforced her hatred with stories of bastards and their evil. She remembered similar tales from her childhood. She became obsessed with a future of Jon Snow killing her children, or taking their home. As a future lord, her paranoia was much stronger that it would have been, were he simply a bastard with no future. She saw in him hints and shadows that only she was aware of. She became a protector for her children, and the acts the servants committed against him were further proof that the gods wanted justice for the sin that was his birth.

She fell so deeply into the lie of why she hated him, that she began to believe it herself. But at its core, it was jealousy that drove her. Love that was twisted into something ugly. And the only thing she’d protected with her warped view of Jon Snow was her pride.

But Sansa’s words had shattered the lie.

Because there was no way she could twist Jon’s actions into something evil. There was no sinister explanation for why he’d begged Ned to let her have Bran and Arya. There was only the truth, which she’d always denied: he was a boy with a good heart, who loved his siblings fiercely.

And Catelyn could no longer delude herself. It had never been Jon in the wrong. He had never deserved her hatred, her cruelty. He had only been a scapegoat for her own insecurity, the hapless victim of her festering jealousy.

And she hated herself for it.

Catelyn walked down the corridor, dazed by this strange, new reality. Part of her wanted to retreat, to look for an escape from this new knowledge of herself.

But Catelyn was not a weak woman. Not anymore.

But she needed to hug her children. She needed to affirm that they were loved. Because every time she now thought of Jon Snow, she remembered a horrific thing she’d allowed done to him, and grew chilled when she contemplated someone treating her own children in such a way. Of someone hurting her precious babes like she had knowingly hurt Jon Snow.
She had to make it up to them. To Robb, to Ned. She had to somehow show she truly did regret her actions.

She silently opened the door to the girls’ rooms, hearing the voices murmuring within.

She halted at the door, freezing in shock. In the room were her daughters and Septa Mordane. Catelyn was confronted with Arya, standing small and alone before the Septa, who was clutching her arm so tightly there would no doubt be marks. Arya was trying to pull away, tears running down her splotchy cheeks, her hair a frizzy disarray. Sansa sat at their table, head down, hands clenched tightly in her lap.

The floor was covered with food and broken tableware. Fine glass, porcelain, a ruined hand-threaded rug that cost a fortune. A stained, white linen tablecloth embroidered with the Tully sigil.

“—a disgrace to your family! To your name!” Mordane was berating, acerbic. She shook Arya with every word. “Can you do nothing right? Look at your sister, how flawless she is, and yet all you do is scream and play in the dirt like some street urchin! Why, you’ll never be a lady, you horrid girl! Never! You are proof that the gods were sent to test me, for how else could you have been born of such a noble family! It’s that dirty Northern blood. You’re a little savage, like the rest of those godless, uncivilized heathens!” she raged. “Just like your barbarian of a father!”

“Shut up!” Arya screeched, trying to claw her had away, to escape. “Shut up, shut up, shut you! I hate you! You’re evil! Evil!”

“Stop it,” Sansa whispered, hunching lower in her chair. Tears hit the table. “Stop it! Stop it, please! Leave her alone,” she sobbed, shaking. “Leave her alone!”

The septa ignored them both, and her tirade continued.

Catelyn was frozen on the spot. What was happening? Watching her daughters in such pain, Catelyn felt as if a sword had plunged through her chest.

How long had this woman been hurting her babies? How long have I allowed her to?

Catelyn did not know why she’d even brought Mordane with her to the North. No, that wasn’t true, she knew why. It was because they had forced her to. Because she was a lady, and that meant obedience. To her father, to her husband, to the Faith. To everything but her own desires, because she had no other choice.

Obedience. Hidden, festering feeling. Compliance. That’s what she’d been taught from birth. That’s what had made her so miserable her entire life!

And that’s what I’ve been teaching my babies, she realized. Catelyn wanted to throw up.

She pushed into the room so forcefully the door gave a resounding crash as it collided with the wall. The occupants in the room jumped, and the septa immediately let go of Arya, turning to Catelyn with a horrified, guilty look on her face.

It only lasted a moment before she gathered herself and began to defend her actions, saying how unruly, disrespectfully, disobedient Arya was. How she’d ruined their meal, how she’d destroyed priceless family belongings.

Catelyn ignored all of it, looking to her daughters. Sansa’s eyes were swimming with tears, and there was a plea in their gaze.
It was Arya’s defensive glare that broke her heart. Her youngest daughter didn’t expect any help from Catelyn. *Because I’ve always taken the Septa’s side. I’ve always ignored Arya’s desires.* Arya, who was outspoken and wild and passionate, defiant in a way Catelyn *wished* she’d been.

Her little wolf, who she’d tried to tame.

*No more.*

Catelyn drew herself to her full height, and look at the septa with such a chill in her gaze, the woman stopped midsentence, mouth hanging open. Her hands shook with *fury.*

“You will leave this House, and never return, or with the gods as my witnesses, I will have you whipped for daring to harm one of my daughters!”

They stared at her, stunned. Arya’s eyes were huge, disbelieving.

Mordane’s mouth opened and closed, aghast. “My lady, I-I am a septa, your daughters need—”

“What they don’t need is you,” Catelyn snapped. “Now get out, unless you wish to test my word!”

The Septa hesitated just long enough that Catelyn opened her mouth to yell for a guard, before the woman got the picture and scurried out of the room. Catelyn slammed the door shut behind her, and the sound echoes like the end of a nightmare.

Catelyn stood there, breathing harshly as if she’d just performed some extraneous task. Yet she felt as if a huge weight were lifted from her shoulders.

Sansa burst into tears and ran towards her, throwing herself into Catelyn’s arms and sobbing loudly. She crouched down and squeezed her daughter tightly. “I’m sorry, mother, I’m sorry,” Sansa kept repeating, and Catelyn soothed her, all the while meeting Arya’s gaze. Her youngest stayed back, a wary, wounded wolf cub.

“I don’t *want* to be a lady,” Arya declared, voice shaking but defiant. “I *won’t*. That’s not *me.*”

She held Catelyn’s gaze, but the Lady of Winterfell could see the trembling of her lips, and shivering of her small body. She was prepared for rejection, for her words to be dismissed, as they always had been.


Arya burst into tears and ran towards her, throwing herself into her mother’s arms. Catelyn sat there for a long time, holding her babies and crying with them, years of pain pouring out.

Her last thought was for Jon Snow, regretting how she’d been unable to love a motherless child.

Chapter End Notes

Few comments:

1. Domeric Bolton, in canon, doesn't leave the Vale until 297, and it's 293 in this fic. But I needed him because of reasons >:)
   (And I think someone once asked me to save him? Although him living to the end is
questionable)
Nothing but his age has changed, he still did and is all the things from canon. Also, does anyone know if Domerix was actually knighted, cause i can't find that info?

2. Jon's anger and actions may seem OOC for show watchers (or maybe not, if one remembers the beating-up-Ramsay thing) but book-Jon is a lot darker than his show version, and filled with a lot of rage. Usually, it takes a bit to get him there, but not always. In one book scene, he brutally beat his friend into the ground during training, all because of a memory of Winterfell. I've always thought his hidden rage is the Targaryen part of him, kept under ice; they were all famous for their tempers, after all.

3. Septa Mordane is probably more evil than in canon. But oh well, plot!

4. Sorry no return letter yet, it was coming this chapter, but i need two more scenes before it, and Domerix's part ended up being way longer than intended. (So, blame him. Damn Boltons, always ruining shit.)
Viper's Trap

Chapter Notes

I liiiiiive!!! :D

My exams are OVER! YASSS!! No more long interruptions! (Till April...)

Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear Jon,

I know of Water Dancing, and a man who was the first sword has to be amazing at it. Maybe I’ll meet him in King’s Landing. We’re returning there on the morrow. Maester Cressen has taught me many Braavosi traditions, many traditions from all over Essos. I want to see them all, Jon. I want to travel, to explore. Sometimes, I think it wouldn’t have been a bad life, had I been born a sailor. I want to go to Braavos. And I will, one day. I’ll see a Fire Hawk, and walk the streets, and spend hours watching the mummeries. I hope you’ll be with me.

House Darry was one of the Houses that aided my family in the Rebellion. They’ve been supporters of ours for generations. When the Baratheons took the throne, the Darry family lost much of their power and land. Ser Willem Darry was Master-at-Arms in the Red Keep. He is the one who took my brother Viserys to Essos before I was born. Be careful, Jon. I’m not sure what the Prince is planning, if anything. But in King’s Landing, everything someone does is remembered. We’re going back there, and I’m not sure how much you should tell me anything more. Myra says that there is always someone watching.

The ore meeting went as expected. Cousin Stannis has been in meetings since the Tourney ended, recording orders for armour. I only saw the melee and joust, but in the melee the men wearing our armour were faster and won much more often. Myra is very pleased, so I’m taking that to mean it was a success.

I know you’ve noticed that there is a second letter. A part of me refused to send it. I’m embarrassed, I think. But also scared. I learned something new about myself during the Tourney, and I’m not sure if I like it. No, that’s a lie. I don’t like it; but I won’t hide from it, either. It will change your opinion of me, I know. It will make you seem me as worse than you do. So, I leave it up to you to read it or not. I am ready for any response from you.

I am a dragon.

Daenerys.

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“You realize, this ore will change much. There will be men who find themselves inspired to search it out and uncover the secrets themselves. Smiths trained in Valyrian Steel may even succeed, given enough time,” Stannis murmured, coming to stand beside Ned.

The Lord of Winterfell look up from his vigil over the armory, watching the dozens of men carrying
pieces of metal from out of Tobho Mott’s stores. The master smith and his apprentice were directing the workers about, loading armor into crates bound for the ships docked in the blackwater. Most of the metal stores were already gone, and the bidding had been fierce. Ned knew Stannis had made an immense amount of gold in the last week. He had little interest in that, however.

Ned Stark cared little for luxuries. The North was cold, hard, honest.

“Aye, I’m aware.” His tone was patient; Stannis was hinting at something.

“The ore comes from volcanic rock. As you know, these islands are still active; the Dragonmont rumbles every so often.”

Ned’s gaze went up, looking at the tall peak in the distance, towering above the castle. The Dragonmont was an active volcano; possibly the only one in Westeros. Once over the past few weeks, he’d seen dark smoke rising from its peak, but there hadn’t been an eruption for centuries; years before the Targaryens had landed on these desolate shores and built their dark fortress.

“Speak plainly, Stannis. It’s unlike you to hesitate.”

The man frowned slightly and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Ned noted the brief discomfort Stannis exhibited. The Northern Lord found himself, not for the first time, contemplating the Lord of Dragonstone. A hard, aloof man, who only softened in the presence of his family. Ned had once misunderstood that hardness for cruelty, but now he understood that Stannis had a difficult time interacting with others. He wondered how Robert’s treatment had affected the younger Stannis. Ned remembered, all too well, the disparaging comments Robert would tell him during their days at the Eyrie.

The eldest Baratheon brother had no lover for Stannis. Over the years, as Ned slowly got to know Stannis, he’d found himself increasingly displeased with Robert. Stannis may be hard, just, and even joyless by Robert’s estimations, but he was a good man.

A good Lord.

Certainly better than I.

“Very well,” Stannis drew himself up, meeting Ned’s eyes. “I’ve prepared for the eventuality that others will uncover the secrets of Aluminum. I’ve been looking into other sources of the ore, of other volcanic deposits in Westeros.”

And that’s when Ned understood. “The Northern Mountains.”

Stannis gave a sharp nod. “They may be dormant now, but the records tell me they are volcanic in origin. Dragonstone, for all it’s potential, is small. The ore deposits won’t last at this rate. However, the Northern Mountains span leagues of land. We could form an alliance, ensure the ore remains in our power.”

“No,” Ned said automatically, turning away.

Stannis kept pace with him as he made his way back to his room. “Change is coming, Lord Stark. The North must change with it.”

“The North has stood untouched for millennia,” Ned responded, stern. “I will not pollute it with southern ambition.”

“The North is stagnant,” Stannis snapped. Ned halted, frowning severely. Stannis ground his teeth
in frustration, looking down at Ned from his taller height, blue eyes narrowed. “You have land, wood, rock, minerals, and yet no development, no change.”

“Do not tell me of the North, my Lord,” Ned warned. “Our people are few, and culled every day by the Iron Born, the Wildlings, and the Winters. Our time is needed for survival, not for games of greed that destroy nature. We are of the old Gods, and we have no need for the trapping of the south.”

Stannis’s jaw clenched tightly, and a muscle pules there. Ned stood strong.

Change and ambition had destroyed his family. His father’s machinations, his plans, his attempts to change the Northern way had led to their near destruction. Lord Rickard, Brandon, and Lyanna, all dead due to the Southern way. No, Ned would follow the old gods. The path that had ensued House Stark’s survival for eight thousand years. No other House on this continent could trace their lineage back that far; no other house had catacombs so deep that even Ned had never gone all the way down.

The past must be honored, or it would lead to their destruction.

“With gold, you could feed your people, hire men to protect them, build castles and glass gardens. The Night’s Watch could be rebuilt anew,” Stannis insisted.

Ned shook his head, his hands twitching at all these changes. He tried another tactic. “My people would never stand for southern interference.”

“You are their lord,” Stannis said. “Their opinions are irrelevant.”

Ned sighed, wearily. “You know as well as I that that is false, Stannis. They may obey, but it will be grudging, slow.”

“It would still a step in the right direction,” Stannis insisted, voice hard.

Ned’s ire rose. “The North has no need of change!”

Stannis remained unmoved. “Then the North will fall.”

Ned slammed his fist against the ship’s wooden railing, the conversation he’d had with Stannis the day he’d departed echoing in his mind. Before him, the northern shore of the Red Fork river was peppered with reeds, with tall green grass concealing the land beyond. In the distance, the blue midday sky hung over the fields and scatterings of trees, bushes, and streams. The Riverlands were rich and healthy. Not like the cold, hard dirt of the north.

Ned exhaled sharply.

What did Stannis Baratheon know of the North? Of the constant threat of wildings, which had chased his people from the far north, of the raiding of the iron born, which had desolated the western coast? What did Stannis know of Winter, and the biting chill, the starvation of his people?

Gold could build castles; glass houses. A traitorous voice echoed. He banished it away ruthlessly. No, what Stannis proposed would only corrupt their way of life. The North was simple, honest, straightforward. He had no desire to enter into the greedy games of the south. Ned Stark had too much to do regarding his own family and holdings; just thinking about orchestrating such a massive project as the one Stannis proposed left him bone weary.
Ned just wanted to return home, to take his family back where they belonged. Safe in Winterfell, under his protection.

Had we stayed safe in Winterfell, Lyanna, you would have been alive today, safe in the North. Father would still be here, and Brandon would be heir. As it should have been.

He thought of Benjen, who was acting as the Stark in Winterfell in their absence.

Had they never mixed with the south, Benjen wouldn’t sometimes look as if he were one moment away from shattering. He hides his grief well, and Moat Cailin helps, but Ned worried for what his brother’s future would entail when Jon took command of the castle.

Perhaps he could overlook the construction of new castles, the traitorous voice whispered, and Ned pushed it away, this time with more difficulty.

Ned sighed, closing his eyes briefly. The schemes of man only led to heartbreak, and the North was above such a thing.

Yet without the south, I would never have Robb, and Sansa, and Arya, and Brann. I would never have wed Catelyn, who has been my lady, despite all our hardships.

Jon would never have been born.

Ned’s heart conflicted between the reality of his family who was gone, and the family he now had. One could not have coexisted with the other.

“Lord Stark,” a man’s voice interrupted bring Ned away from his somber thoughts. The Lord of Winterfell turned, having noted the outward challenge in the words, as well as the trepidation buried underneath.

Edmure Tully stood before him, straight and sure, but his brief swallow gave his nerves away.

“My Lord,” Ned responded. Edmure’s blue eyes and red hair were the exact shade of Catleyn’s own. He was of medium height with a stocky build and a thick, coarse beard. Upon his chest was the Tully sigil, a fish swimming before red and blue waves.

Ned had seen many men of the North, Riverlands, and Vale in the tourney; representatives from many of the houses. Roose Bolton himself had been there, although Ned hadn’t interacted much with the pale Lord beyond brief a greeting and sitting in his general area. Many of those lords, Roose included, had sailed north with them, and then they’d separated near the Inn at the Crossroads. However, unlike many, Edmure had never greeted Ned at Dragonstone, although the Lord of Winterfell hadn’t noticed until this moment.

“It is not my concern, what goes on between a man and his wife,” Edmure began, and he seemed to be forcing the words out quickly. “But Catelyn is my sister. She Lady of Winterfell, and you dishonor her this way. I beg your lordship to allow her home.”

Ned pressed his lips together, anger raising. The man was correct; he did not wish to treat his wife this way, although her actions warranted punishment. Still, Edmure had no place in this conversation. “You are correct, my Lord. This is not your concern.”

Edmure’s jaw clenched, but he nodded, once. The man left, apparently satisfied that he’d said his peace.

Try as he might, Ned couldn’t hold onto his anger. He would have done much worse had any man
treated Lyanna as Ned had treated Catelyn, shaming her by bringing a bastard into her home, and then sending her away because of said child. As her brother, he would have taken her side, no matter the dispute. It did not matter that Jon was not Ned’s real child; the shame was there.

He turned his head to the left, seeing the approaching form of Riverrun, and strengthened his resolve.

It was time to have a conversation with his wife.

*****

Amongst guards and maids, Catelyn Stark sat upon a blanket outside of the castle, heart in her throat. In the distance, Sansa and Robb horserace, their shouts echoing over the distance. The part of her that was ingrained protested at this show, at the way her daughter yelled, at the way her hair was disheveled by the wind. At the image in her mind of Sansa falling to her death, her small body broken by the massive horse. She wanted to put a stop to it immediately.

This was not the behavior of a lady!

But she’d never seen such a joyous smile on Sansa’s face. The way the shy fear in her daughter’s eyes had given way to happiness when Catelyn allowed this behavior kept the Lady of Winterfell from interfering.

She turned her attention away, gripping the glass of wine in her hand, and focused on Bran and Arya. They were nearer to her. The two had found a pair of sticks and were giggling as they pretended to swordfight one another. Catelyn’s mind protested, watching as Arya stumbled and fell, staining her dress with grass.

“Arya!” Catelyn scolded, unable to help herself. The girl flinched, looking up warily. Catelyn hesitated, an order to come here and sit on the tip of her tongue. Swordplay was not for ladies, and her dress would be ruined!

_That’s not me, Arya’s voice whispered._

With some difficulty, Catelyn beat down her instinctive scolding, and said. “Be…be more careful. Your brother is young.”

Arya’s eyes lit up, nodding enthusiastically as she sprang to her feet. They continued playing, giggling. The sound was almost worth the pain of digging her nails into her palm. But Catelyn would at least try to give her daughters more freedom.

_It will ruin them, a part of her whispered. What will they be, if not ladies? What could they be?_

She gripped her glass tighter, swallowing down the liquid. They were still young; Arya would grow out of this fascination with weapons, and Sansa would slowly lose interest in this dangerous behavior. They would wed well and be ladies of powerful keeps, safe and happy.

“Catelyn.” For a brief instant, she was positive she’d imagined the word. But that deep Northern brogue, his calm, hard voice, was unmistakable.

She didn’t even need Arya’s excited “Father!” to be sure.

Her head whipped around. Ned Stark stood before her, tall and powerful, and a part of her chest clenched.

She swallowed with some difficulty, and despite the fact that she wanted to rush towards him, to beg
him to allow her to come home, she had too much pride for that.

Anger, longing, bitterness, sorrow. All swirled within her. She rose carefully to her feet, and clamped her hands tightly before her. “My Lord.”

Arya ran to him, as did Bran, and they hugged his feet. Ned bent over to take both into his arms, face softening. It was almost unfair, how much of a good man he was. Why could he not be a cold, cruel lord, so that she could at least take comfort in hatred? Why must she love him so, to the point that her feelings were polluted and twisted into the vilest jealousy?

He let the children down, and moved toward her. She remained coolly receptive, but she couldn’t hide the pounding of her heart, which she was sure was traitorously showing in her throat. How dare this man, drive the Lady Catelyn to such a state?

“I trust your trip was fruitful, my Lord,” she began, composed.

Ned grew a bit grimmer, and a vicious part of her hoped her act would hurt him, just a bit.

“It was, my lady.”

“And I suppose you’ll be returning to Winterfell soon, my lord. Shall I order Robb and Sansa’s things prepared? Or will you be taking all of our children with you?”

She wanted to halt her tongue, to beg him to take her back, to ask forgiveness. *I was in the wrong. I know that.* A flash of Robb’s new timidity, his uncertainty when he bested one of the Riverrun boys, his face questioning if the win was real. Jon Snow’s rigidity whenever she approached, the way he’d stare at the ground until she passed.

Yes, she knew the punishment was just, but she refused to scamper and plead. Not here, in front of them all.

Pride was all she had before her husband.

“All of us will be returning North,” Ned murmured quietly, meeting her aloof gaze. Catelyn’s legs nearly gave out in relief.

Her responding “Oh,” was faint, and cracked just a bit. She looked away, pretending that the words didn’t fill her with joy. “It’s late, my Lord. I imagine you’re tired. Will we be staying the night, at least?”

“Aye,” Ned said simply, and she refused to shiver at his voice. Refused to admit how much she loved hearing him speak.

They went through the motions as was proper. She greeted Edmure, his men, and the Northmen that accompanied her husband, acting perfectly comfortable in her role as Lady of Riverrun, even though her father hadn’t allowed her to assume the Lady’s duties. But this house had been hers for years, and she knew everything about it.

They made their way back to the castle and she had them all comfortable housed in moments, and ordered the servants to prepare a meal befitting a visiting Great Lord. Robb and Arya were ecstatic at the news that they were all returning home, Bran didn’t mind either way, and Sansa was a little melancholy. Her eldest daughter was a summer child, through and through. She enjoyed the south, the knights and feasts. Catelyn contemplated the possibility of betrothal to a Riverrun Lord, but she was on shaky ground as it was. It would take a while before Ned fully trusted her again, and betrothal was too large a topic to breach now.
And for the beautiful daughter of the Lord of Winterfell, there are greater fish than a simple lord.

After dinner, which was tense for the family, Ned spoke briefly with her father in the study. No doubt informing him that they were to leave in the morning. She ordered the maids to pack their belongings, and the stable boys to ready their horses. Catelyn itched to leave; Riverrun was a childhood dream. It would always hold a place in her heart, but this experience had darkened her views of her family, just a bit.

She missed her hot room at Winterfell. She missed her position as a true lady.

She missed her Lord Husband.

And a small part of her was grateful that Jon Snow would be gone. It was one thing to feel regret in the privacy of her own mind; it was another thing entirely to act upon it.

Ned found her on the ramparts, looking down over the Castle and the river lands beyond. Her childhood home. Her original desires. She met her husband’s somber gaze. And the man that had by chance become hers.

“How was the trip to Dragonstone?” she asked, turning away. They stood side by side upon the ramparts, and try as she might to keep her coolness, the privacy between them softened her tone.

“Stannis Baratheon’s new ore is half the weight of iron, but of comparable strength. He has a master smith with him, who has adulterated the pure metal with various components. It bends while iron breaks; it resists rust. By the time I left, lords, knights, and magisters were clamoring to purchase it.”

Catleyn took in this information. “Lord Stannis will become a very rich man, if so.”

Ned paused, hesitant. “He seeks an alliance with me. There’s a chance that the ore can be found in the Northern Mountains.”

Catleyn blinked at him, surprised. She’d known Ned for ten years. He was not a man that enjoyed changes. He withdrew into himself and followed a strict way of doing things. “The Northern lords would never agree to such a thing, Ned. You know how stubborn they are about keeping to the old ways.”

Personally, Catelyn thought the Northmen were sometimes contrary just for the sake of it. Their simple, plain lifestyle and way of speaking had been difficult to adjust to; more so than the climate. She flushed, just a bit, when she remembered her actions. Her underhanded methods of tormenting Jon Snow were so contrary to the Northern style, she would not be surprised if the Lord’s who’d heard of it now scorned her.

Ten years of effort, lost from petty jealousy.

Ned gave a mighty sigh. “I understand them well, Catelyn. I, too, wish to keep to the old ways. However…I’ve come to realize that in doing so, I’ve been staying still.” He paused, voice resigned. “I haven’t moved forward since the Rebellion.”

Catelyn twisted to look at his somber profile, shocked. In ten years of marriage, Ned Stark rarely, if ever, mentioned what occurred during those two years.

He turned to look at her, and his face was calm yet sad. Her heart hurt for him.

Slowly, Ned Stark began to speak, to tell her the story of Harrenhal, of Lady Ashara Dayne, of Lyanna Stark and the Knight of the Laughing Tree. Catelyn stood silent, half afraid this moment
would end if she spoke.

“Brandon had to ask her to dance, for I was too craven to do it myself.” There was a faint self-mockery in his tone, and Catelyn pictured a much younger Ned, too scared to talk to a maiden. Strangely, the image did not fill her with jealousy, but with a gentle amusement. Her husband had never been one to whom words came easily.

“Did you love her?” she whispered, almost soundless. She braced for anger, and for an instant, his whole body tensed.

“Aye,” he murmured, a sadness to his tone that touched her, even as her heart ached with the confirmation. “I was a green lad, but I loved her. But the war changed things for everyone. I saw her twice in Dorne, once when I was seeking Lyanna’s location, and then again when I returned Dawn to her, Arthur Dayne’s blood on my hands.”

*And she was lost to me forever.* He didn’t say the words, but Catelyn heard it. Her woman’s heart twisted strongly, half in envy that the woman had swayed her husband away, and half in pity. What would she do, if Ned had killed Edmure? Could she bear it?

Or would she take her own life in sorrow?

Catelyn looked away. “I was jealous of her. For years, I was jealous. I regret that I took it out on her son. Believe me in that, if nothing else. I regret my actions towards Jon Snow.”

Ned stilled for a moment, and looked down at her. For many heartbeats, they stared at one another, and he saw the conflict in him. Catelyn assumed that he was waring himself on whether to forgive her, and tensed in preparation. Finally, looking suddenly much older, Ned exhaled. His voice when it came, was strangely resigned. “I should have told you the truth about her. I should not have remained silent. I knew that you hated him, but I still couldn’t speak of it.”

She stepped closer to him, just a bit, and rested her head on his shoulder.

Quietly, Ned continued his story. He spoke of Lyanna’s disappearance, of searching for her, of finding her dying in a pool of blood. He spoke of the war that followed Lord Rickard and Brandon’s murder, of wondering if every day would be his last. Ned acknowledged that he’d recovered from any of it. He’d never allowed himself to truly grieve for Lyanna or his father or brother.

For many moments, they stood quietly. Then Ned said, “For the longest time, where I looked at you, I felt shame.”

She waited.

“Not only for Jon. I felt shame because you were never meant for me. You were to be Brandon’s wife. He was the one you loved. I knew I was a…disappointment to you. Winterfell, the North; they were to be Brandon’s. He would have made an excellent Lord. I was never meant to rule.”

The words were hard, as if he could barely bring himself to say them. Her proud husband, who did not share his heart. She felt such love for him at that moment.

“I did love him. He was to be my future. For years, I’d trained to be his lady, I learned everything there was to know about Brandon Stark, and I loved him,” she murmured. “When he died…when he died, I was so bitter at the gods. I felt that they had robbed me of my future.”

Ned’s shoulders were tense, and Catelyn suddenly realized something. Perhaps just as she’d believed she was living in Lady Dayne’s shadow, Ned believed he’d been living in Brandon’s. this revelation
calmed her, and for the first time, contemplating his past loved wasn’t painful.

They did not marry for love. But that doesn’t mean that love didn’t grow.

“I was wrong, Ned. You were different, yes, but not less. You’ve never been less. You are a wonderful lord, husband, and father. And the gods blessed me with you.”

There was something soft in those Stark grey eyes when they met her own, and Catelyn clasped his hand in hers. “Come to bed with me?” she invited, softly.

Ned’s response was to raise her hand and place a kiss on her knuckles.

It was time to move forward.

*****

Oberyn Martell spent a week at House Darry, engaging in fruitful talks with the Lord Raymun. The man had not expected him, which Oberyn usually relied upon, and the tell-tell trapping of their true loyalties hung upon their inner walls in red and black. Personally, Oberyn believed they were much too open about their allegiances, but as long as they fell in line with Doran’s plans, Oberyn didn’t concern himself much. Like he and Doran, Lord Darry wanted revenge for his slain brothers, and that was a wonderful way to tie men to a common cause.

The pretense of having letters to deliver was a blessing, and Oberyn often was grateful that the Citadel was such a power-hungry order, keeping a stranglehold on the movement of information in Westeros. It made his visits to various houses much more plausible.

He rode into the Inn swiftly, jumping off his horse before the beast even came to a halt, reveling in the danger of vaulting off such a powerful animal. Gods, he needed a good fight. If he could not find that, a good fuck would suffice.

He thought of his enchanting Ellaria, whose bed may very well be filled with men and women at this very moment, and wished he could be there with her. He wondered if she’d had the child yet. Another daughter, or perhaps his first—that he knew of—son? Whatever the child was, he knew it would be fierce and powerful.

He entered the inn cheerfully, scanning around until he saw Syrio by the bar. His squire was nowhere in sight, but it was dark, and he assumed the boy was in his room. Oberyn was glad he had convinced the water dancer to come along. Not only would he teach Jon what he lacked, but he could watch over the boy while Oberyn conducted his business. The shrewd child already knew that Oberyn was in it for revenge, but he couldn’t allow him to know too much of their plans. His loyalties were still firmly with the North, and it was doubtful the implacable Eddard Stark would ever see the truth of the realm and band with Dorne.

And anyone who supported fool and his murderous Lannister supporter was an enemy to Oberyn Martell. He’d been honest when he told Jon that House Martell had no quarrel with House Stark; that did not mean he would hesitate should they find themselves on opposite sides of a battle.

He sat beside Syrio, who only gave him a half-hearted scowl, and ordered a drink. The ale was not of the quality of Dorne, but then, so little was in these backward northern kingdoms.

“How goes the boy’s training?”

Syrio swirled his cup—was that milk?—and took a sip. “He adapts the lessons quickly, makes the stances his own. Reacts swiftly to new challenges and situation. Anticipates movements and counters
The look Syrio shot him was knowing, but largely disinterested. The two had known each other for years, and the bald man had been present all those years ago when the Sealord had officiated a pact with Dorne. Syrio did not concern himself with things like revenge, he was a water dancer to his core, and flowed calmly from one situation to another.

“Something has happened,” the man continued, taking another sip of the milk. “Days ago, he returned with blood on his hands and a hollow look in his eye. His form was disrupted, and his movements abrupt. Only for that day, but I noticed. He has withdrawn into himself more than before.”

Oberyn raised a brow. He wondered if the boy had killed someone.

He was about to make his way to the room. If anything could cheer the kid up, it was probably the letter Oberyn had stashed in his pocket. But before he could, a man came to stand before him. “Prince Oberyn Martell, my Lord would ask for a moment of your time.”

Oberyn leaned back, interested. He scanned the man up and down, finding the pink sigil of a flayed man upon his breast. He did not know the sigil; it was his brother that knew all the houses, Oberyn only memorized those that were relevant.

“And your Lord is?”

“Lord Roose of House Bolton, Prince.”

Oberyn did not know of the man, but the name Bolton tickled his memory. A Northern House. Intrigued at why this man sought him out, and how he knew of Oberyn’s presence here, the Prince followed the servant up to a private room.

Inside, seated at a small table, was the palest man Oberyn had ever seen. He had a round, plain face a straight, thin dark hair that reached his shoulders. His skin was nearly the pallor of a corpse’s, and the image of death did not dissipate when the man raised eerie, moon-pale eyes. He wore black ringmail and a spotted pink fur cloak.

The man nodded to his servant, and they were left alone, the door closing silently.

“Prince Oberyn,” he greeted, voice mild. There was a bland smile upon his thin lips, and he motioned to the chair before him. “Please, sit.”

Oberyn tilted his head and prowled closer, dragging the chair out with a purposeful squeak. The quiet room echoed with the sound, but the man’s mild-mannered expression never faltered.

Oberyn employed a tactic that he had found to effectively separate the dangerous men from the sheep. He gave a lazy smile and leaned forward until he knew his breath could be felt by the other man. “Roose, is it? I admit, it has been a while since I have indulged in a dalliance with a lord, but you are passable, I suppose. A little more time in the sun would not do you ill, though.”

He waited, keeping his expression lazy. At this point, the fools were usually affronted and jumped back as far as they could, as if his words somehow could physically harm them. Some reacted with anger, threatening him and ordering him to leave. But the dangerous men…

Roose Bolton smiled serenely in response, and Oberyn learned back, suddenly warier. “Alas, prince, my tastes are not in that vein. I have another matter to discuss.”
Obeyrn raised a brow, expectant.

“My son recently made the acquaintance with your young squire. They have formed a friendship of sorts, and as both will one day be bannermen to young Robb Stark, I have found the situation agreeable.”

“I see,” Oberyn responded leaning back in interest.

“I propose you take Domeric on as your squire, alongside Jon Snow. He has three years of training and was a page before that. Furthermore, he is skilled with horses, remarkably so. A lad useful to any Knight.”

For a moment, Oberyn said nothing, and Roose Bolton remained calm.

“I have no need of another squire,” the prince said simply. “If that is all—”

He was about to stand. What a waste of a meeting.

“Sources tell me you’ve been to House Darry,” Bolton said, that same unfazed voice. There was a threat behind the tone.

Oberyn gave him a razor smile. “I am a popular man. I had many letters to send.”

“Of course. It’s just interesting is all, that you stopped here, despite Maidenpool having been a more convenient location.”

Oberyn relaxes back, unfazed. “I quite enjoy this Inn. I am a man who likes interesting places, as you may have heard.”

“The Inn is interesting indeed,” Roose replies smoothly. “You know, at one time it was named the Clanking Dragon. Before the Lord Darry of the time destroyed the black sign, which became a beacon of the Blackfyre Rebellion.”

“A history lesson, my Lord? This is turning into such an interesting meeting.”

“The Darrys have always been such powerful supporters of the Targaryens. Even to this day, was it not the Ser Willem Darry that spirited the exile Targaryen prince away?”

Oberyn simply stared at him, relaxed. Speculation amounted to nothing. “You’d have to ask some other man. I have little interest in politics and plots.”

“Of course. A man such as you would have no use for…allies, then.”

Despite himself, Oberyn’s eyes narrowed at the intriguing proposition. Was this a trap, or was the man’s inquiry serious?

“Well,” Oberyn drawled noncommittally. “One can never have enough friends.”

Bolton smiled, and with his eyes, it was an eerie experience. “I could not agree more. I find that if one desires…changes, one must have many friends.”

Oberyn simply watched him, pose casual and faintly disinterested. “And I suppose that in exchange for help with one’s changes,” he said, fairly mocking, “then help can be expected in return?”

“Well, hypothetically speaking, that is how allies function.”
Oberyn studied him, truly interested now. “House Bolton. Of the Dreadfort, is that not so? I was a terrible student of history, I much prefer the present, but that name is familiar. Were you not once known as the Red Kings?”

“That is so, Prince.”

“Bitter rivals with the Kings of Winter. Whom are known simply known as the Warden’s of the North, now. The Starks.” Oberyn was beginning to understand this man’s game. He wondered if Ned Stark was aware of this man’s ambitions. He almost pitied the Lord of Winterfell. “How many times has your House tried, and failed, to take control of the North? Eight thousand years of conflict is quite a dedicated endeavor.”

“History is a fascinating subject,” was all Bolton said in response.

Oberyn leaned back, tapping his fingers onto the table. This was an interesting opportunity, but dangerous. Jon Snow was necessary for their plans, and if the boy discovered the undertones of this meeting, Dorne could very well lose him. He was completely loyal to his Northern family, and threats to them would shake the fragile ties he was developing to Oberyn. And a small part of the Prince didn’t desire to see betrayal on the boy’s face. He was ordinarily fond of the brooding child.

On the other hand, allies to the North were rare. Oberyn Martel cared little for the politics of a faraway Kingdom, but if it could benefit Dorne, it would be a true coup. Ned Stark would never side with them, but this man…

He had no time to consult with Doran. But perhaps he needn't make any commitment at this time.

“You son, you say he is good with horses?”

“Exceptionally,” Bolton said, a small smile curving his lips, and Oberyn believed him. “Furthermore, he could be of great use to you in other ways.”

Oberyn tilted his head, brow raised in inquiry.

“I’ve met Jon Snow, and he is his father’s son,” Bolton began, and there was thinly veiled contempt under the words. “An honorable child, difficult to mold. But clever, more so than his father. And likely to take Ned Stark’s cue in any future acts.”

Oberyn shifted. The words were hitting on the problems Oberyn himself had discovered. An implacable, dedicated child, almost startlingly so. The very qualities that so endeared the boy to Oberyn were also the main source of his problems. It was likely that Jon himself would rebel against Dorne’s plans, especially if Eddard Stark chose his side.

“But,” Bolton continued, leaning forward. “there’s something there, under the surface, that could be developed in a more…productive direction, for us both. Domeric could help with that, he could be the conduit between you and the boy. He could break whatever bonds the child thinks he has with the Starks and make him more…open, to outside influence.”

Oberyn shifted, tapping his fingers on the table. For many moments, they simple met eyes.

“This seems a very one-sided agreement, my Lord,” Oberyn noted shrewdly. “Even should the opportunity to change come about, there’s no guarantee help will be available.”

“Even without that possibility, the benefits are many. My son becomes a squire to the famous Oberyn Martell, while also avoiding certain…problems to the North. Furthermore, I facilitate stronger ties with a future lord, who is only missing the name Stark but has the features and
mannerism—unlike his unfortunate trueborn brother—which strengthens Domeric’s eventual position in the North. A fairly even trade, I believe.”

Oberyn wondered what problems there were that this man wanted his son to avoid.

“Squiring for me is not like sitting in some pampered lord’s keep, Bolton,” Oberyn warned. “Death is always a possibility, and that could do more damage to any potential friendship than benefit.”

Roose simply smiled. “It would be an unfortunate end, of course. But I have a spare, although he is not nearly as talented. And perhaps you are exactly what Domeric needs; my tutelage did not take as I wished, and he has been much too coddled in recent years. A snake in the grass could teach him much about the world, which is its own reward.”

This was a cold man, Oberyn thought. He was unruffled by Oberyn’s attempts to anger him not because he was particularly good at self-control, but because there was precious little to control in the first place. A dangerous man, who spoke so casually about his son’s death.

Yes, he really pitied Ned Stark. The man should watch Roose Bolton carefully, but he probably was not. After all, he’d given Oberyn Martell a powerful pawn with little fuss at all.

He debated the merits of an alliance with the Dreadfort, thinking briefly of Jon’s trust in him. And then Oberyn thought of Elia, screaming beneath Lannister scum. Of her children, murdered brutally and then displayed like trophies before a fool ‘king’.

“Well,” said the Red Viper, “as I said, one can never have too many friends.”

*****

When Oberyn finally made it to Jon’s room, he felt an unsettling mix of regret and triumph. To assuage his brief gilt, he’d check up on the boy, deliver his letter, and ask him about the blood Syrio had seen on his hands. He couldn’t put aside his ambition—wouldn’t—but that didn’t mean Jon life would be miserable.

What would Elia say if she could see him now?

Nothing. Because she is dead, murdered by scum who still walk the earth while she is in the ground, her spirit unable to find peace. Oberyn had many nightmares of her walking the Red Keep, body ravaged as in death.

Banishing away his regrets, Oberyn pushed into Jon’s room.

The boy startled badly, looking up from where he sat on the floor, the pungent smell of polish in the air. Before him, Dark Sister gleamed brightly, a beautiful masterpiece of ancient art.

Not the sword I’d thought he’d get.

There were dark circles under the boy’s eyes, and his expression was akin to haunted. Suddenly Oberyn’s casual speculation form the bar came back to him, this time more seriously. Had the boy really murdered someone?

“No greeting for your Ser, broody boy?”

Jon sighed, the familiar exasperation on his face, and Oberyn calmed, just a bit.

“You look as if you have committed murder. Tell me, I am not one to judge.”
Jon twitched, pressing his lips together, but said nothing. Oberyn walked into the room and reclined himself on the empty bed, nose wrinkling at the disgusting smell. “Open a window, broody boy, changes are that stuff is poison.”

And Oberyn had quite a bit of experience in that area. His mind went fondly to Tyene. Jon got up and did at told without a word, the prince watched him, increasingly worried. What had happened?

He narrowed his eyes. Perhaps this had something to do with Domeric Bolton? If the boys were so at odds, the other boy would only hurt his goals for Jon.

And then I have a good excuse to avoid entanglement with the Boltons.

He tried again to ask Jon what the matter was, but the boy just shook his head, muttering “Nothing.”

He remained fixated on his task of polishing the swords, almost obsessively so. For many moments Oberyn waited, but Jon never asked about a letter. Usually, it was the first thing he did, a half excited, half demanding look in his eye as he all but ordered Oberyn to hand it over. The amusing behavior often tempted the prince to break the seal and read the missive, for surely the young dragon had some undefeatable technique to so entrap his young squire without even having met her.

Especially considering how terrified he was of you at first, Daenerys Targaryen.

He casually reached into his pocket, making sure the movement was obvious, and that the paper crinkled. He kept watch over Jon, noting the instant tenseness in the young body. Jon cleaned the sword with even more dedication, refusing to look up.

“A missive from your lady love, broody boy. It’s thick this time, she must have much to tell you.” He casually swung it before Jon’s face. His squire’s grey eyes followed it, a strange mix of fear, guilt, and longing there. Jon resolutely looked away.

“My hands are dirty,” he said, lamely. “And I have to finish this. You can just leave it here.”

Oberyn heard the dismissal in the tone, but there was no way he was leaving until he uncovered the cause of this behavior. If it was Domeric Bolton…

“I hear you have met the young lord Bolton. His skill with a steed is widely commended, and I was thinking of taking on another squire. Two boys are better than one, especially when the youngest is so broody. Perhaps a companion will loosen you up.”

Jon’s gaze shot up, but rather than fear, horror, or anger, Oberyn glimpsed a brief interest, almost excitement. Envy was there too, but that was an emotion he’d expected. “I went riding with him,” Jon said, “I’ve never seen someone so good. It’s like he and the horse were of one body. The made jumps I wouldn’t dare try.”

Well then. Apparently, whatever had happened had nothing to do with the Bolton heir. That was both a relief and faintly disappointing. He would have to see this through, it seemed. Unfortunate.

They returned to silence, Oberyn watching as Jon methodically polished every inch of the sword, and then carefully wrapped it in cloth. For a moment, Jon stared at it, then at the unassuming letter at the bed, as if he were contemplating polishing it again.

“This is ridiculous,” Oberyn complained, pushing up. He leaned down and grabbed Jon’s chin, forcing the boy to meet his eyes. Still, that hollow look. “Read the letter or tell me what happened. Choose.”
Jon glared, trying to jerk away, but Oberyn held tight, waiting.

“Fine!” Jon snapped. Oberyn let go, and Jon stumbled to his feet, grumbling as he washed his hands in the basin by the door. It took longer than was necessary, in Oberyn’s opinion.

Finally, almost begrudging, Jon stanched the letter up and opened it. Another letter fluttered down, and Jon caught it reflexively, staring in surprise. Oberyn saw the number ‘two’ written on the paper, and Jon squinted.

He held the second letter and then looked down at the first. With a deep, fortifying breath, he began to read. Jon stood there, in the center of the room, and Oberyn was fascinated by the changed he saw. Jon slowly relaxed. At one point, he furrowed his brow, at another, his lips curled faintly, at another, he seemed worried. Emotions and expression flitted across a suddenly expressive face. At one point, he even shot Oberyn a suspicious look!

Seven Hells, but the Dornishman wanted to snatch the missive and read what that tiny girl had written that could evoke such unguarded emotion from his withdrawn squire! Was it strange that he was almost jealous? He’d made love with less feeling!

Finally, Jon looked up, and the hollow look was gone, replaced by concern. He grabbed the second letter and didn’t hesitate this time before tugging it open.

Oberyn watched as his face progressively lost all color. The prince straightened, feeling his own heart pounding in concern.

Jon finally looked up, horribly pale. Oberyn surged to his feet. “What is it? What has happened?”

His heart pounding, thinking of Tyene by Daenerys side. Had his daughter been harmed?

For a brief moment, Jon seemed torn, and then he thrust the letter to Oberyn eyes wide and lost. He turned away, beginning to pace, and Oberyn scanned through the words. He read every damning word, and almost regretted it. This was private. Had Jon not been so shaken, Oberyn knew he’d never have handed this over.

For all his intellect, Jon Snow was still a boy of ten. This must be his first experience with the harsh reality of a Targaryen’s rage. It was understandable that he was shaken by her demand. Even Oberyn was startled, not by the act, but by the origin. For a pampered princess, the viciousness was impressive. The turmoil it had caused her was a pity, however.

A dragon indeed.

He sat slowly, eyeing his pacing squire. “Dragons are passionate creatures. Vengeful as well. It was a just punishment, not a sign of madness.”

Jon shot him an incredulous look, and Oberyn prepared himself to argue. This must be a harsh reality for the boy; Oberyn assumed he had romanticised the princess in his mind, making her a sweet, perfect thing. No doubt stories of the mad king were going through his head.

“Madness?” Jon spat. “What in the world are you talking about? She’s not mad.”

Oberyn’s brows shot up, surprised. “Then why are you acting like this?”

The prince was honestly baffled.

“Because she shouldn’t have had to see such a thing!” Jon snapped. “I should have—” he bit off,
turned away.

‘Been there’ Oberyn assumed he’d meant to say. He loves her, the prince realized, honestly startled. When had this happened? How? He was only a boy of ten.

“Then the punishment…?”

Jon met his gaze soberly, and there was a darkness in his eyes the prince had never seen before. “He deserved that and more.”

Jon looked at the letter in Oberyn’s hand, regret crossing his features, and then he took it back. “What do I say?” he whispered. “How can I…she think’s I’ll turn away.”

Oberyn contemplated the problem. “There is a viciousness inside of her, Jon, and she fears it.”

The boys head snapped up, and for a moment, Oberyn viewed recognition on his features. Jon looked back down at the letter, and his shoulders relaxed.

He looked back up, determined. “Will you send one more letter? I know we were meant to leave but I-I can send it myself. I can be back within the day.”

Oberyn stared at him, this young boy with old eyes. Then the Red Viper snorted, sighing in surrender. Ah, broody boy, I like you too much.

“Never let it be said that Oberyn Martell has a schedule.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is for MagnusXXZ who has gotten me thinking about a full economic restoration plan for the North, lol. Love your comments! :D
Act IV: Dragon’s Conquest

Chapter Notes

Warning, this chapter contains difficult themes and may be difficult for many people to read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The mask was made of wood, she saw, with the tell-tale lines and texture. She could almost feel it on her fingertips, although the red lacquer would surely make the wood much smoother than its naked form.

Dany stood upon a high black cliff, looking down at the city of the dead. Its alive-yet-not citizens walked the streets, following the chanting and the flames. The sun was swallowed by this place; she shivered, feeling the shadows creep closer.

“I don’t want to,” she murmured, and her voice echoed strangely. She didn’t know what she was protesting, but it was the most honest thing she’d ever said. Almost as one, the people froze, and thousands of soulless eyes looked up, up, up.

She stepped back, horrified, and used the rock to hide.

The red-masked woman beside her stayed in place, her black cowl covering her completely, until Dany wondered if there was even a human in there.

To go forward, you must go back, the mask whispered, unmoving. Dany knew the words were only spoken in her head.

“But I’ve never been here,” she protested. How can I go back?

“The light is weak, bride of fire,” the woman whispered, and suddenly, she stood right in front of Dany. “Feed it, awaken it, restore it.”

The young girl flinched back, aware that the cliff was right behind her. “No!”

If I fall, the dead will devour me.

“Beware, bride, and trust no one. They all seek the fire, and fire is powerful blade.”

Without warning, the woman disintegrated into shadows, which rushed up to Dany and shoved her small form off the cliff.

She fell and fell, screaming for help, but no sound existed in the dead city. It seemed to last an eternity, which made the sudden impact of the ground all the more terrible. The collision jarred her, and her lungs burned with the effort to breathe. Body broken, there she lay, amongst dead rocks and black bones, with the living-yet-not creeping ever closer.

If they kill me, they kill everyone.

“The light is weak, bride. Feed it.”
She turned her head and met giant, burning eyes.

Daenerys awoke with a suddenness that left her dizzy. The human body was not meant to go from deep sleep to sudden wakefulness, and the experience left her disoriented. For a moment, she lay there on her back, panting, terrified. She felt too heavy.

Feed it.

“I don’t want to,” she whispered; if she said it aloud, the rejection would be more powerful than if it was only in the quiet of her mind. “I won’t.”

The price was too great.

“M’lady?” a sleepy voice asked, and Dany flinched, suddenly coming back into herself. She turned her head to the left, and there lay Tyene, blinking sleep-blurred eyes, golden hair in disarray.

“Another night terror?”

Tyene pushed herself up, looking down in worry.

No, Dany thought, staring up at her friend. Night terrors aren’t real.

“Yes,” she whispered, shivering.

Bride of fire.

Your path was altered.

Destiny is set.

Feed it.

She sprang up from bed, banishing the echoes of dozens of dreams with their strange, cryptic warnings. The woman was wrong. Destiny wasn’t set. She had a choice.

Tyene signed and rose as well, groaning.

“You can stay in bed,” Dany told her, a bit guilty. “It’s still early.”

Tyene hesitated, but Dany saw the temptation in her eyes. The silver princess smiled. “Go ahead, I’ll wake you for the morning meal. Tyene paused a second longer, but then crawled back in with a grateful murmur.

Outside, the sun was shyly peaking over the horizon, inviting her. Dressed in a blue nightdress hemmed in white lace, her hair in a long, thick braid down her back, Dany walked out onto the balcony, soaking in the warmth. This was the only thing good about the Red Keep: it was warmer than Dragonstone. With a sign, her dream studiously shoved to the back of her mind, she looked down at the vast city below. King’s Landing hadn’t changed at all, with it’s strange, unpleasant smells and hostility. She didn’t know why she’d expected something different.

Well, she thought with a frown, the city hadn’t changed, but the Keep had, in small ways, according to few highborn friends, girls recommended by Myra, all of whom were from various crownland houses, Larys of House Brune—nice to its Lord—Maryam of House Rykker—daughter of Lord Renfred—and Helna Massay—Ser Justin’s young cousin. They’d remained in King’s Landing during the Tourney, and were all appropriately excited about Dany’s stories of what had occurred,
although she skipped over Suggs and the trial. They were more interested in the title of Queen of Love and Beauty, anyway, and Jaime. Thirteen-year-old Maryam, in particular, sighed happily whenever Jaime was near. Their behavior towards him amused Dany, although she didn’t really understand it.

Before leaving King’s Landing, she’s asked the girls to keep a record of any news in the Keep, as Myra always told her to do.

*Information is power, my love. Sometimes, the only power a lady has. But you must never seem as if you are seeking it.*

And so, while Dany made friends with the girls, she also used them alongside a couple of servant children she rewarded with sweets, and one laundry maid who for some reason particularly pitied her. The girls didn’t seem to mind; they loved to gather information and then analyzing it, speculating on the changes and what would happen in response.

The Master of Laws, an old lord with a pure white beard, was ill. There was a rumour that the King was thinking of appointing his younger brother, Lord Renly of Storm’s End, as his replacement. The current holder was stubborn, however, and wouldn’t retire. This was disappointing news; they were hopeful that Lord Renly and his young squire, Loras Tyrell, would come to the capital. They were both rumored to be exceptionally handsome boys.

Daenerys found the next news more interesting: the Queen’s father, Lord Tywin Lannister, had made a visit to the capital. His youngest son, the Imp Tyrion Lannister, has accompanied them. Tyrion rarely left Casterly Rock, and his last visit had been for the Queen’s wedding, and Daenerys had only been an infant then. An ugly, mean little man, according to Helna. Although when asked, she couldn’t say exactly what he’d done that was so terrible. Lord Tywin had left soon after, taking his son with him. Daenerys was disappointed; she wanted to see the face of the man whose army has sacked the city and been responsible for the murder of her good-sister, niece, and nephew.

The royal family had changed a bit. Apparently, the King had been seen coming from the queen’s chambers much more often, although most of his time was still spent either in his suite, on hunts, or at feasts. He’d been in a particular rage lately, blowing up at servants for the smallest of slights. The queen herself was no better, her tongue vicious and her punishments more so. Larys made a point of commenting that Cersei had started wearing long-sleeved, high necked gowns and more powder on her face.

Dany avoided both like the plague.

Tommen and Myrcella hadn’t changed, by all account. Still sweet children. Tommen had a new kitten.

Joffrey, on the other hand, was still an insufferable, horrible little toad. She’d seen him once on her third day back, accompanied by this giant man with a horrible burn on his cruel face. She’d ducked away behind a column before the prince had seen her, knowing from past experience that the only way to deal with Joffrey was to not deal with him. She’d heard the prince call his guard ‘Dog’; a cruel moniker, although the man hadn’t responded.

Ugly as he was, with a horrible sneer, she automatically took any man’s side against Joffrey. Although the horrible memory of Clayton Suggs kept her far away, when once she may have belligerently attempted to talk with the frightening man, to prove a point if nothing else.

Just because Joffrey was cruel to him didn’t mean he was innocent.
The man’s name was Sandor Clegane, and called The Hound as a sobriquet. He was of the Westerlands, a small House sworn to House Lannister. His elder brother was a monster known as The Mountain; a cruel, vicious person who’d been part of the Sack. Any charitable feelings she may have had faded after that.

Dany stood out there for over an hour, thinking of these changes, and soaking up the morning sunlight. Soon, Tyene woke on her own, in time for their morning meal. They stopped by the rookery on the way to Stannis’s solar, and Dany was disappointed by the lack of a letter. A whole week, and nothing.

Something heavy was growing in her stomach, try as she might to stop it. She wondered if he’d been so disgusted by her, that he’d never write back. Maybe he’d escape Prince Oberyn, and was at this moment heading to Essos. She found herself affronted by the image.

You’d better write me back, Jon Snow!

Her emotions a complicated mix of irritated, disappointed, insulted, and pained, she walked quietly beside Tyene to the solar. Inside, they joined Cousin Stannis, Myra, Steffon, and Ryelle to break their fast with figs, a smoked cheese, juice, and ham on toast.

The family chatted amongst themselves, although Daenerys remained uncharacteristically quiet. Noting the behaviour, Stannis mentioned his plans to talk to the Master of Coin about transferring the Crown’s debt to him. Small intrigues always distracted the young dragon.

“The less reliant the crown is on Lannister gold, the less power they have,” he murmured, taking a bite of his meal.

“Are we richer than them now, father?” Steffon asked.

Stannis shook his head. “It takes a long while to smith the ore, and Mott is only one man. It will take time. But we have enough to shoulder the king’s spending for at least a couple of years.”

“Oh,” he responded.

“But will we be richer?” Daenerys asked, curious. “And more powerful?” She liked the idea of being better than them somehow. It was a small revenge for all they’d done to her family.

“Mayhap,” Stannis responded simply.

“Tell me, my love, what is the common saying about the Lannister?” Myra asked while feeding the giggle Ryelle a spoonful of crushed fruits. The little girl obediently opened her mouth, babbling.

“A Lannister always pays his debts?” Daenerys hedged.

Myra nodded. “That is another kind of power. One of fear, yes, but also one of promise.”

Steffon looked confused, Daenerys echoed it. “I don’t understand,” she admitted, a tad reluctant.

“One’s word—one’s reputation—is oft more powerful than gold,” cousin Stannis began, crisp. “The Lannister are famed for never breaking their word: when they make a promise or issue a threat, they see it through. The assurance of fair payment makes men more willing to deal with the Lannisters. Even if another has gold, without such a reputation, their sway is brittle.”

Daenerys popped a fig into her mouth, chewing softly. “So, you have to prove that you’ll keep your word? That you’ll do exactly what you say you will.”
Myra’s smile was serene. “Yes, my love. Fools speak grandly yet mean none of it: their words are wind to all who known them. The wise keep their word, and they are then taken seriously by all.”

Dany chewed, contemplative. She knew the power of a reputation: her father’s haunted her to this day. She’d never thought that it could be a good thing, however.

“Make a promise only if you’ll keep it,” Stannis summed. “Issue a threat only if you’ll see it though.”

Dany took the words to heart.

The lesson came into play much earlier than the princess expected it would.

She was walking on her way back from lessons with Maester Cressen, mind spinning with details about the Rebellion, and which Houses supported which side, when she turned the corner and came face to face with the Queen. Cersei was flanked on either side by two guards and two handmaidens.

Daenerys stilled; for a brief moment, she considered turning around and fleeing, but it was too late. Cersei’s eyes were trained on her, and a thunderous hatred twisted her lovely face. At the moment, she was the ugliest woman Daenerys had ever seen.

Heart pounding. The young girl’s mind raced furiously; what was Cersei doing here? The queen never came to the Maesters’ Hall; they attended her privately, in her own room!

Trying to minimize this situation, Daenerys immediately fell into a deep curtsey, forcing her voice to take on a reverent, submissive quality when she breathed “Your Grace.” At her side, Ser Justin automatically fell into the deepest of bows, echoing the greeting.

For many seconds, they held that position, hoping against hope that Cersei would continue on her way. She didn’t allow her body to move, maintaining the position without a hint of difficulty.

“The dragon whore,” the Queen murmured, and her steps got closer. The armor of her guards rattled as they followed. Daenerys didn’t allow herself to flinch; such a title was common in King’s Landing. “Not, that’s not right, is it, snake? I suppose you think yourself a queen, now. The young ‘Queen of Love and Beauty,’ is it?”

Dany breathed carefully. Cersei usually kept her torments to words. Only once had she physically harmed her: Dany had spoken back, and the queen had slapped her so hard, she’d cut her lip. Another time, when the princess had shoved Joffrey away when the boy wouldn’t stop pinching her, the queen had forced Dany to kneel before her chambers, head to the floor, from dusk to dawn. When she’d finally been dismissed, her legs had gotten so numb, Ser Justin had to support her on the way back.

But in none of those incidents had Cersei sounded quite so hateful. Dany’s mouth was dry, and she suddenly became aware of how isolated this hall was. Ser Justin was only one man.

“Tell me, spawn. Shall I bow before you now?”

“Of course not, your grace,” Dany said quickly, head bowed, taking care to speak like Myra did. “The eldest unwed daughter or female ward of the House is usually crowned as a sign of respect for the Lord.”

“You think to educate me?” the queen’s voice was raising, shrill. “Like I am some fool.”
Dany bit her tongue; she never knew how to deal with Cersei. Silence was often as damning as a response.

“Well?” Cersei snapped. “I asked you a question, you little whore.”

Dany bowed deeper. “No, Your Grace. I only meant the title means nothing. I am no queen, now or ever. My family was rightfully stripped of their standing, and I’ll marry a bastard.”

She sent a silent apology to Jon.

Cersei was silent for many seconds. Dany breathed carefully.

Finally, the queen walked past her in dismissal. As they passed, one of her guards bumped into Dany, sending her to the floor. She gasped as her elbow hit the ground, and wounded tears gathered in her eyes. Ser Justin remained bowing in place, but she saw the way his fingers twitched.

Something darker than pain was gathering in her heart, and she wished the man’s face was bare, so she could know his features. Cersei’s face, she would never forget.

The queen’s party continued on, and Dany gave a small, relieved breath.

And then Jaime Lannister rounded the corner opposite the way Cersei was going, saw her on the floor, and exclaimed, “Daenerys!”

The concern in his voice was obvious. Dany heard the queen’s party come to an abrupt halt.

Jaime looked beyond her, and froze when he saw them. His face began to pale. He looked away, swallowing. Cersei turned her head, catching sight of her twin brother, and her face grew murderous.

“‘Daenerys’?” the queen echoed. “‘Daenerys’! You call her by name!”

Dany scrambled to her feet, but it was too late. The queen ordered her guards to grab them. Ser Justin made to draw his sword, but Dany ordered him to stop just in time. If he drew steel on the queen’s men, he could be executed for treason. Justin looked at her, his hand wrapped upon his pommel, and she glared into his eyes, imperious.

He let go just as one of the guards grabbed him and shoved him to his knees, holding his own sword at Justin’s neck.

The other guard grabbed her and wrenched her arms behind her back, making the girl cry out in pain, and turned her to face Cersei. The queen was furious. No one had ever given Dany a look of such naked hatred.

A small part of her wanted to cower.

But her blood ran hot, her rage ignited. Before she could stop herself, the silver princess sent the queen a challenging glare, raising her chin up just a bit, teeth clenched tightly.

The queen’s eyes lit with fury. Dany couldn’t find it in herself to regret it.

“Cersei, wait—” Jaime began, but bit off the words when the queen turned to him, looking even angrier than before.

“You would protect her, brother? You would choose her over me?!”

Jaime remained silent, mouth opened slightly. Then he scoffed, “Of course not.”
The words were hollow, tinny; the emphasis all wrong. Jaime Lannister was a terrible liar. Dany could almost be amused by that fact, considering he’d kept the wildfire plot secret for ten years.

Cersei turned to her. “It seems that calling you a whore was more appropriate than I’d thought, you little slut. Tell me, is this why your guardian seems to favour you? Why Ned Stark publicly forgave you? How many men have you had inside your filthy cunt?!”

Dany flinched back at the word. She’d never heard it before, but for some reason, she remembered that scene with Clayton Suggs. She’s not dared ask what he’d been trying to Tyene; all she’s known is he wanted to hurt her. Myra had promised that she would explain it later, and Dany had been content with that fact.

She was only nine years old. She didn’t want to know all the evils of the world yet.

With a few furious strides, the queen came to stand before her. Cersei grasped the front of Dany’s pale pink gown, her nails scratching deeply into the pale, sensitive sink at her neck, and jerked her hand down.

The bodice of her dress ripped away. Dany felt the cool air touch her bared skin, and her stomach dropped in shock.

Both Jaime and Justin cried out in protest.

But Cersei was relentless, seemingly maddened as she gripped fabric against and again, ripping everything Dany wore to shreds, until she was nude before them, except for a few pale scraps that covered nothing.

All the while, Cersei was muttering ‘younger and more beautiful,’ as if it were some sort of curse. Finally, the Queen stopped, panting, and Dany was sobbing, unable to stop herself. Her skin was littered with bloody scratches from the queen’s nails, many of which had broken during her frenzy. Those jagged edges did the most damage.

Cersei stood there, and Dany glimpsed shock in her eyes for an instant, before it was covered with a haughty sneer. “Let’s see how appealing you are now, whore. In fact, let’s show everyone; they’d have seen it eventually!”

Cersei ordered the guard to drag her along. The man gripped her by her long silver hair and did as ordered, heedless of her pained cries and struggles.

Ser Justin was on the floor, struggling as the other guard pinned him down, sword at his neck.

Jaime stood in their path, frozen solid, his skin all but leached of color. Dany sent him a desperate, pleading look. Help me. He stared back turmoil on his face.

When they reached him, he looked to the ground and let them pass.

Dany felt a piece of her heart break.

For a single beat, she nearly broke down. Then she remembered.

I am a dragon. I am a dragon. I am a dragon.

Repeating those desperate words in mind, she gathered every bit of strength she had, and bit down hard on her tongue. Blood pooled in her mouth, but the pain centered her. Daenerys refused to cry another tear. This false queen would not break her.
But she nearly did.

Cersei dragged her through the Red Keep, and hundreds saw her bleeding, nude body as it was viciously paraded past. Dany kept the litany of words in her head, blocking out everything else. She would not lose. They made their way into the throne room. Dozens of hightborn were in attendance, and all noise ceased when Dany’s ragged form came into view. She felt their eyes on her as Cersei dragged her straight though the middle of the gathering, her guard holding her in such a way so that they had an unimpeded view.

The empty Iron Throne loomed over them all, and Dany locked her eyes on it. She felt strength from the sight; a chair forged by the greatest creatures the world had ever seen. And her family had tamed them. She kept staring at the monstrous piece of metal until they excited; that throne was proof of her family’s dominion over thousands. That throne was their—her—legacy.

I will not shame my ancestors by losing to a lion.

Dragons bow to neither gods nor men.

Finally, they reached the small council chamber, and the murmur of male voices suddenly ceased.

“Your slut, Lord Baratheon,” Cersei sneer, the picture of haughty contempt. “Your education leaves much to be desired.”

On cue, the guard threw Dany forward so hard she hit the ground with a grunt.

For an instant, there was only shocked silence. Dany raised her head and saw Stannis seated there, his face one of absolute horror. She’d never seen such a strong emotion on his face. She bit her bleeding tongue harder, refusing the suddenly near-overwhelming urge to sob. In fact, she pushed to her feet, stopping herself from shaking by pure willpower along, and stood tall.

Nude but for a few errant scraps, and covered in blood, Daenerys Stormborn clenched her fists at her side, raised her chin, and glared them all down, these tiny men and pathetic woman who thought they could shame a dragon.

She turned last to Cersei, and found the woman stunned.

You are no queen.

The little girl inside her just wanted her cousin to hold her so she could cry. But that little girl didn’t belong in this malicious place.

Stannis surged to his feet so quickly his chair was thrown to the ground with a resounding boom. She was the only one who didn’t flinch. She held her self so ridged that if she moved now, she may collapse.

“What is the meaning of this!” he roared, so loud that the entire throne room behind them must have heard. His face flushed a deep crimson, his rage so strong that the veins in his forehead pulsed as if they would burst.

Cersei cringed back, her eyes widening in shock for a moment, before she regained her composure and spat, “How dare you speak to your queen in such a way!”

Stannis stared at the golden woman, and his rage only seemed to be mounting. He loomed, tall and muscular, with pitch black hair and ice-cold eyes. He looked absolutely murderous.
Cersei took a step back. The guard at her side grasped his pommel. The men at the table stared, totally mute.

Stannis took one hard step forward, his fingers flexing as he stared at the queen.

“Cousin,” Dany spoke, her heart suddenly pounding in a different kind of fear. He didn’t take his eyes away from the false queen. “Cousin!”

He took another step closer, and Cersei began to retreat, eyes huge. Part of Daenerys wanted to let it happen; she wanted to see Stannis wrap his strong fingers around the queen’s pale throat and squeeze until the woman was dead. Her blood screamed for vengeance.

But then they’d kill him.

“Stannis!” Daenerys screamed, and he finally flicked his eyes to her. His whole body shuddered, as if he suddenly awoke. The princess let her body start to tremble, and the tears welled in her eyes. “I want to go to my room,” she whispered, voice cracking despite her best effort.

For a moment, he just stood there.

Then her cousin tugged off his belt, dark green mantle, and gloves. Then he jerked off his pitch-black tunic, uncaring of his suddenly bare chest, and kneeled before her. Carefully, Stannis Baratheon draped the black cloth over her small form, which contrasted sharply with her bright red blood. Dany distantly noted that it was the first time she’d ever been in her House colors.

Stannis swept her into his arms and stood, striding out of the room without a backward glance.

Over his shoulders, she saw the carnage he’d left behind, and the wide-eyed stares of six men and one woman. The most powerful people in the realm. She wished the Usurper had been amongst them as well. She’d won.

The last thing Daenerys Targaryen saw before she was swept away Stannis’s green mantle—engraved with the Baratheon sigil—discarded on the floor.

*****

Dear Daenerys,

I don’t want you to read this. I don’t what you to see me. But you were honest, and so I will be as well. I won’t turn you away, but you may turn from me. I understand.

Three days ago, a group of men had cornered an elder and his grandson. I intervened, because I couldn’t do anything else. The weak must be defended, and the guilty punished. That’s what I’ve always believed; that’s what I live by. So, I threw myself into the fight, full of righteous anger. I would protect them, because there was no one else to do so, and I would be a hero. I admit to you freely: a part of me wanted the glory, the recognition. I have lived under the shadow of The Bastard of Winterfell for so long, always hungering to prove myself to those who have scorned me. To those who won’t accept me.

But then the anger changed, and I began to like their pain. When they wounded me, I grew so angry, it was like a well of rage I hadn’t been aware existed awoke. I thought: ‘how dare these men touch me’. Together with another boy, I managed to defeat them, and the rage just kept growing. The desire for vengeance, for victory. I wanted to see them submit to me. When it was down to just one
man, who tried to flee, I stopped him and began to beat his head into the ground. By the time the other boy pulled me away, the man’s face was a bloody mess, and the two I’d saved stared at me in horror. When the anger passed, I stumbled into the grass and vomited. That night, I cried myself to sleep.

I understand your rage, Daenerys, and I understand your fear. I share both. If you are a monster, then so am I. If you are mad, then so am I.

I have attached a second letter. If you chose to reply, please do it with that one. If we ever talk of this again, I want it to be in person. Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for offering your name.

Sincerely,

Thank

Yours,

Jon Snow

Late into the night, long after she’d cried herself hoarse, Dany made her way to the two letters on her small table. Completely numb, and stood by the small lamp to read.

She was crying by the time she was done. She didn’t think she’d had any tears left. But these were happy ones, and she supposed they came from a different place.

“If you are a monster, then so am I. If you are mad, then so am I,” she murmured, nearly soundless. “Jon Targaryen.”

A strange, foreign warmth filled her small, battered heart.

With a slow sigh, she set the letter down and carefully closed it. She would read and respond to the second one tomorrow.

Then Dany crawled back into her crowded bed, carefully climbing over Steffon’s softly snoring form and burrowing down between Myra and Stannis. Tyene slept quietly behind Myra, and Ryelle was in a crib beside her. With a small sigh, Daenerys curled closer to her cousin, who grumbled in his sleep and tossed a heavy, warm arm over her.

She fell asleep with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

So, this horrible scene was the original reason why I needed Jaime and Dany to get close.

Now, Cersei here is under a lot of pressure, and it's making her progressively paranoid and angrier.

First, Dany seems to be winning support from many powerful Houses. Also, Dany is under the care of Stannis, who suddenly struck it rich. From her perspective, Dany is building a strong base of power. For those of you who remember Cersei's prophecy, you'll recall that she was warned a 'younger, more beautiful queen' would one day take
all she holds dear, and that all her children would die. Dany is canonically the most beautiful woman in the world, and GRRM has compared her to Queen Naerys, whose beauty is called 'almost unworldy' even amongst the Targaryens.

Second, Robert has been particularly abusive lately, after what he learned about Ned, and then after what she ordered with Suggs. He's taking it out on Cersei, who he already hates, and it's basically rape at this point. Also, this all happened while Jaime was gone, so she was totally isolated in KL besides the kids.

Third, Jaime has always been 'hers,' but not only did he abandon her to go to the ore meeting, but now he's seemingly taking Dany's side over Cersei. Another sign in her mind that Dany may be the 'more beautiful queen'

Fourth, a secret reason

Also, don't be too hard on Jaime, chances are if he'd stood up for Dany here, Cersei would have done much worse to her. He knows that very well.
Lion's Armor

Chapter Notes

I blame Jaime Lannister's complicated brain for how long it took to write this chapter. Damn him.

Also, amazing art by Queen_Tyna_Maria on chapter 31! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dear Daenerys,

Thank you for the information about House Darry. It fit my basic suspicious about what Prince Oberyn plans. Well, that is unless all this is simply his own whim; if you knew the prince, you’d understand how possible that is. I admit, sometimes he drives me near mad with frustration. Still, I’ll take your words about spies into consideration, and I won’t ask you again. I understand that King’s Landing is a difficult place. Our home will be different; we’ll never need to worry about being watched, or about petty intrigues. I admit I have little patience for double speak; I’d rather share my opinion honestly, or not at all.

Lord Stannis is an impressive man, to have discovered such a valuable material. More so to have made use of it. In the North, little has changed for many years. The lords are a stubborn lot, and change is looked at with suspicion. So many things have remained the same, and my father seems satisfied with it all. It feels a bit traitorous to say it, but sometimes I wish more could be done in the North. White Harbor is our only city, although it probably pales in size to King’s Landing, and is the richest holding with its trade and silver mines. Sometimes, I think the North could benefit from more trade, more commerce. We have the resources for it, but not the inclination. I never gave it much thought until I saw Braavos; its not the richness of the city that I envy, but the variety of their goods. The North could do well with some of that, if we better applied out strengths. Like lumber, for example; the Wolf’s Wood is huge, and many places need lumber. Braavos, I think, would be an eager trading partner, considering they’re a seafaring people. The fleet docked around the city was massive; the largest I’ve ever seen.

Did you know the North has no fleet? It’s always been something that’s annoyed me. We used to have a powerful one, but then King Brandon Stark—Brandon the Shipwright—attempted to sail across the Sunset Sea and never returned. His son, Brandon the Burner set fire to the remaining ships. This happened centuries before your family unified the continent, and I’ve always found it odd that the fleet was never rebuilt. Odder still considering how vulnerable we are to the Iron Islanders. Lord Stannis is the Master of Ships, he must have his own opinion of the North’s weakness in this area.

I’m sorry, I must be boring you. These are just things I think about from time to time. I know it’s not my place to. My father has cause to follow the old ways, I understand that.

I will move on to current news. The boy I mentioned in the other letter is Domeric Bolton, heir to the Dreadfort. His father, Lord Roose Bolton, is my father’s most powerful bannerman. Although perhaps not his most loyal one. I am wary of Lord Bolton, Daenerys; but perhaps I’m just wary of
most people. He often looks at me as if calculating the best way to use me. The guards at Winterfell
tell awful tales of what goes on in the Dreadfort. I understand that a lord must be strict, but there’s a
line between firmness and cruelty, and I believe Lord Bolton has long crossed it.

Domeric, however, is not like his father. He does not care much for the plight of the smallfolk, but he
isn’t cruel, either. He befriended me, probably with the intention of understanding bastards. He has
a brother he’d never met, but wishes to. It warmed me to him considerably. Any man who cares
more about that person than the status is one I could call friend.

It’s fortunate we get along, because Prince Oberyn has decided to take him on as another squire.
When you witness how skilled Domeric is on a horse, you’d understand. The Prince only allows the
best to squire for him. Domeric was both pleased and disappointed: no one would turn down Prince
Oberyn, but he also wanted to return home and meet his brother. I am both happy for a companion
and, I admit, a bit envious. Also, I am worried. I believe this move was somehow part of Lord
Bolton’s plans, although I have no idea how. I’ll keep you informed.

I will write to you again when we reach our next destination. The Prince simply said “south” when I
asked. Someday I’ll find out how to get a straight answer from him. Although, this is assuming the
man has any plans at all. Sometimes I doubt it. Remain well, and I hope King’s Landing is improved
this time around.

Yours,

Jon

*****

Jaime Lannister wasn’t one prone to self-reflection. He acted impulsively, usually regretted it, and
then studiously made it a point to not think of it. He’d done so many less than savory things, that if
he spent too much time recalling them, he’d never be able to arise in the mornings.

But in the month since his sister—his lover—had nearly destroyed a young girl, all he could think of
was the past. It loomed over him, waiting for the chance to strike and drag him down into pathetic
melancholy. No fight, no drink, not even sleep could keep it away.

“We destroy ourselves,” he muttered, forlorn as he stared up at the ceiling, the floor hard beneath
him. His room in the White Sword Tower was small yet lavishly decorated. Despite having given up
his name and birthright, his father had not submitted to the tradition and insisted that his son
remember exactly where he came from. Even here, he couldn’t forget his blood. “Others may kill us,
but we destroy ourselves.”

For Jaime, all the truly horrible things he’d had been done in the name of love, of family. Of a person
that was both to him: his twin sister, the only woman he’d ever desired. The only woman he’d ever
been with and wanted to be with. He’d taken comfort in his motives; he may stain his soul, but he
did it to protect her; to love her another day. It was sick, it was wrong, and sometimes his stomach
turned unpleasantly at the notion.

But it was what he felt, and he couldn’t deny it. Sometimes, he didn’t want to. He wanted to stand
before all these sycophants and declare himself before them. What care did he have of their scorn?
He was a lion, and they sheep.

Sometimes, late at night, he tried to convince himself that if the Targaryens could be excused for
such a behavior, then so could he and Cersei. He would say it to her and to himself, repeating the
words until he nearly believed it: their love was good, normal, natural even. Had they been born
dragons rather than lions, it would be expected, perhaps even celebrated, _at the very least tolerated_. They could be open about their love and he could finally claim Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen as his own.

But life was no false children’s tale. Their manes were gold, not silver, and their blood was of the Andals, not the Valyrians. They would be killed for this; perhaps their children as well. Not only were they committing the sin of incest, but in doing so were also cuckolding a _king_.

He wondered if the fact that he was also breaking his oath as a Kingsguard would compound the sin, or if it was simply something they’d expect of Jaime Lannister. After all, taking a king’s wife couldn’t compare with taking a king’s _life_.

He gave a bitter laugh, and tipped the bottle of scotch into his mouth, only to find it empty. He’d consumed the last of it hours ago, but he kept trying nonetheless. Perhaps he hoped that some magic would fill it; one that didn’t involve having to rise and face the world. But his belief in magic had died ages ago, alongside his belief in a _good_ world.

_Screaming, pieces of innocent pink silk torn, an unmarred young body revealed, blood seeping from dozens of scratches, hopeful eyes asking for help._

_Those eyes dimming at his rejection like a candle extinguished._

_Those same eyes, but older, in a woman whose husband he’d sworn to protect. A queen, whose screams he was supposed to ignore._

Suddenly enraged, he shot up and chucked the flask as hard as he could at the opposite wall. It smashed, dented, and ricocheted back towards him. He stared, breath ragged, until it came to a rest beside his bed. Then he flopped back down onto the cold floor, body shaking.

Daenerys was one more regret. One more thing to push behind him.

His eyes burned. He knew they were red from many sleepless nights. But every time he shut his eyes, all he could see was the madness in Cersei’s.

“Familiar madness,” he muttered. And then laughed, the sound tinged in hysteria. Was this to be his punishment, then? He killed a mad king, fell in love with his own sister—his _twin_—and the gods decided to punish him in the most ironic, cruel way possible.

“Surrounded by madness,” he muttered, and threw his arm over his eyes, hard enough to hurt.

It had one month since Stannis Baratheon had sent his family, alongside Daenerys, back to Dragonstone. Every day that passed saw Jaime Lannister becoming increasingly _useless_. Barristan the Bold had grown impatient with him, but he no longer gave a shit what the old man thought. The _Bold_, so honorable and _just_ he acted, as if he hadn’t also betrayed his old king and sworn to Robert to save his own life. The man betrayed the Targaryens just as Jaime had. How dare the hypocrite judge him?

The lion scoffed, sick of this place, these people, _everything_.

Sick of seeing the betrayal in watery violet eyes. Why didn’t she understand? He did the right thing! He knew Cersei’s jealousy; had he tried to intervene…

Jaime shuddered as the horrible images of what _could_ have happened filled his mind. He knew his sister, he knew what she was capable of. Tywin’s daughter indeed, both with cruelty in their blood. Had Jaime intervened, had he truly incited her jealousy, Daenerys’s fate would have been a thousand
times worse than what had happened.

But then why couldn’t he forget the betrayal in her eyes?

“You have no right to be betrayed,” he muttered, savage. “I owe you nothing. Nothing! As if I would choose you over Cersei.”

Jaime Lannister did not pretend to be a good man. He’d done too much evil—done it willingly—to have such childish illusions of himself. He was no young girl’s knight in shining armour; no hero in some naive maiden’s song.

So stop haunting me!

At first, he’d kept repeating the words to himself. He’d spared her a terrible fate, and she should be grateful to him for it. He’d done more than he had to; she wasn’t his responsibility! She wasn’t his to protect.

Shining Rhaegar, upon his steed, looking down at him and asking him to protect his wife and children. Then, news of Rhaegar’s death came, and the last bit of Jaime’s hope died. The mad King proceeded to order him to kill his own father, and if that wasn’t enough, he then ordered the destruction of everything.

And so Ser Jaime Lannister drew his sword against his king, stalking up, up, up those melted sword steps. After the act, his sword and armor stained, his shaking legs couldn’t do much but sit on a death man’s throne, so shocked by what he’d done that he could barely remember his name, let alone his promise.

And the results were a ravaged corpse and two small bodies wrapped in crimson cloaks.

“My fault. Everything is always my fault.” Even when he tried to help, he only hurt.

What an idiot he’d been, to think he could somehow make it up to the dead prince by protecting his sister. What a fool. As if he could protect her when the very things threatening her were the things he loved. When would he learn that he was no true knight?

Knights didn’t really exist; honor was hypocrisy, honesty was a lie.

Trying to dismiss the whole incident as one more horrible truth of life, he’d gone about his duties with his normal arrogance, although with a tad more spite than usual, a bit more rage. He tried to convince himself that soon the disgust would fade. After all, he’d witnessed dozens of acts more horrible than that one. He’d seen a man’s skull split in two by an ax, bones pulverized by a Warhammer, entire bodies burned alive at a mad king’s command. What happened to Daenerys was comparatively harmless, by Westeros standards. The event shouldn’t have left him so rattled.

But the pit in his stomach grew heavier by the hour. It only solidified into lead when Cersei’s version of the story reached his ears.

“The Targaryen girl is mad,” one of Cersei’s handmaidens murmured loudly, gathering the attention of those surrounding her. The queen herself stood beside her, the picture of grace and beauty, a mournful twist to her mouth. “She began raving like a lunatic, tearing off her clothes, trying to harm the queen. But her Grace is patient and good. She returned the child to her guardian.” The woman tsked in pity. “What can one expect from the Mad King’s daughter? It was only a matter of time.”

The fools sounding her had erupted in a flurry of words and condolences for Cersei’s experience,
this bit of intrigue and gossip delicious to them. Only a few had been doubtful. Fewer still had walked away, the fools. Cersei’s eyes had tracked them, anger brewing.

Then, the group had noticed him standing nearby, and the Cersei’s gaze had met his. She’d raised her brows as if waiting for his collaboration. She’d no doubt expected him to obediently support her version of events, this haphazard story designed to protect her reputation. She knew she’d gone too far, and she was trying to paint herself in the best light. She expected him to protect her, like he’d always done.

Jaime had looked away, sick to his stomach. He wore all white, his armour and cloak pristine, yet he felt as if he were covered in filth. When had the bright eyed little boy—who wanted nothing but to be the next Arthur Dayne—died and left a tired, cynical man in his place?

“All I wanted was glory. To be a famed knight. To fight and earn a name in history,” he muttered, turning his head, green eyes dull, to look at the Lannister sigil upon his wall. “And earn a name I did. Kingslayer.”

“Coward.”

“What really happened, Ser Jaime?” one of the sycophants in court asked, so loudly it had to be purposeful. There was nothing these people loved more than attention. He stood before Robert’s throne, where Jon Arryn—who seemed to have aged a thousand years in the last week—was sitting and holding court. From her position nearby, Cersei turned and looked over at him, hearing the question. There was a warning in her eyes.

Many looked over, curious and expectant. They knew the story the queen was spreading; but they also remembered the event itself, and many doubted that the girl had done it to herself. The King hadn’t become involved in the story, choosing to let his Hand deal with it. Rumour said he’d laughed when told of it. Men whispered that Stannis Baratheon had left the King’s rooms with murder in his eyes.

The man in question stood nearby, speaking with Petyr Baelish. Almost as if he’d sensed Jaime’s regard, the Lord of Dragonstone looked towards him, face impassive. His brown tunic and dark red mantle were stark in the light.

Ser Jaime met the askers eager eyes, and sneered with the greatest contempt. “I don’t remember giving you leave to speak to me.”

Dismissing the lesser lord from the Stormlands, who sputtered in anger and humiliation, Jaime looked forward. Silent, obedient: the perfect Kingsguard. Cersei’s eyes were angry. Stannis turned back to his conversation with the Master of Coin.

He ignored them both.

A knock on his door distracted him, and he tipped his head to the left, looking at the hard wood. Then he simply closed his eyes. It was late in the night, if he didn’t respond, whoever it was would think him asleep and let him alone.

But the knock continued, insistent, for many minutes. Finally, Jaime snapped. “What?”

The sound paused, and then a hesitant female voice called out. “Ser Jaime, the queen has requested your presence in her chamber.”

He stared up at the ceiling, the words echoing in his ears. Once, those word would have filled him with happiness, with anticipation. They’d been the only good things about this place. Now, hearing them left him tired.
They hadn’t been together since he’d returned. The fat king went to her every night, filling Jaime’s heart with hatred. After the incident, he hadn’t so much wanted to see her, and was reluctantly glad he has cause to stay away. But now she called for him, and he knew exactly what she wanted.

He hated that he wanted her so much.

He pushed to his feet anyway. With no squire around, he couldn’t dress in his armour, so he put on simple brown leathers lined with gold. Taking his sword—the castle was not as safe as many believed—he strapped it to his belt. He opened the door, pushing his hand through his hair.

The maid who waited beyond looked him over, eyes trailing almost helplessly, the lust familiar. Stupid girl; if the queen saw her, dismissal would be the last of her worries. There were many, many women in the past—both at Casterly Rock and here in King’s Landing—who’d simply disappeared after the Cersei has seen their blatant interest in him.

He’d always ignored the implication. Jaime pushed it down, as he did everything else. The world was poisonous, and it wasn’t his job to find a cure. If he were entirely truthful, he didn’t much care about what happened to those women. If anything, he’d felt a sick pleasure at Cersei’s jealousy.

Jaime Lannister had never pretended to be a good man, so why he was feeling this guilt was beyond him. He owed the Targaryens nothing.

He didn’t speak to her as he made his way to Cersei’s room, and proceeded to walk inside and pull the door closed without a word.

The queen was seated at her breakfast table, dressed in a deep red robe left open just enough to give him a hint of her breasts. The look in her eye as she reclined further—thereby causing the covering to slip father—let him know she knew exactly what she did to him.

Jaime swallowed with difficulty and looked away as he sat, reclining casually in the seat before hers. She was the only woman he’d ever wanted, and she knew it.

This was the first time he wished she wasn’t.

“Well?” Cersei asked, leaning forward. The ever-present wine in her hand tipped preconsciously, almost spilling.

“You called me,” he reminded her, and there was a bite in the words he couldn’t help.

Her eyes narrowed, anger sparking, before it was hidden by a smile bathed in poison honey. “You’re angry that we’ve been apart for so long,” she murmured knowingly. He didn’t correct her. She rose to her feet and prowled around the table. He held his position, refusing to watch her.

He wanted to punish her. Not because of what she’d done to Daenerys, specifically, but for forcing him to feel the filth on his hands, when so often he could easily ignore it.

She came and knelt before him, and he looked down. Her green eyes were beseeching, golden hair sparkled. She leaned up and kissed him sweetly, and for many heartbeats he gave in, kissing back. Slowly, his body relaxed.

“Why did you kill my father?”

An impromptu picnic on a windy cliff.

A scandalized giggle as he shared embarrassing tales of lords and ladies.
Tiny eyes begging for help.

Jamie wrenched his mouth away, exhaling sharply. Damn her! Damn them both.

Cersei pulled away, blinking in surprise. “This is the first time we’ve been alone in months, and yet you reject me?” Her eyes widened, and she pushed away. “Do not dare to tell me that it’s because of her. Do not tell me that you allowed that whore to seduce you!”

Suddenly, he could hold it in no longer. He surged to his feet, and disgustedly exclaimed, “She’s nine years old!”

Her face twisted, and that terrifying madness filled her eyes. “And how old was I when you stared sneaking into my bed, Jaime?”

His breath left him in a shocked exhale. “That’s different and you know it,” he bit out.

“Different?” she sneered. “You seduced your own sister. Before I was even a maiden. How is it different? I was a little girl, too!”

He was speechless. What was happening?

You encouraged me. You whispered to me. You ensured I looked at no other!

Jaime’s life had been complicated, but the only unchanged truth in it was Cersei. She was there when he was born, she was there as they grew, she was his first everything. His only. Giggled words at night in their shared childhood bed. Her whispered encouragements in the dark. Her guiding words. Even being found out and separated hadn’t stop her from finding ways to be together.

Then, their mother had died, and they’d grown even closer in their shared grief. They’d weathered their father’s sudden withdrawal together as well. They’d always been there for each other, despite being separated for so many years as children; he to squire, and later she to King’s Landing. He’d even joined the Kingsguard for her, ensuring he could never wed or own property of his own. He’d given up his position as heir to Casterly Rock, although he didn’t mourn that, given how he knew he was unfit to rule. Instead, he’d chosen to stand by her. When he’d killed Aerys, she hadn’t scorned him for it like so many other; she’d simply been relieved that he lived. Then, after she’d been forced to wed Robert, she still loved only Jaime alone. She refused to have any children but his. She refused to love anyone but him.

She’d been the best thing in his life. And anyone who got between them, he took care of.

They’d just been speaking of her recent abortion; Jaime had been the one to bring her the tansy tea.

“I will not suffer one of Robert’s parasites,” she’d sneered. “My children will all be yours, Jaime. Golden lions, every one.”

The guard had come in seconds later, dragging a young boy. The child had been listening at the door. His round eyes and sickened expression let Jaime know all he needed to. The boy had heard everything.

Cersei had screamed, hysterical. She’d ordered the guard to leave. She raged at Jaime, saying how their children would be murdered, how she’d lose her crown.

Jaime had dragged the terrified child down, down, down into the depths of the Keep. And there, in the dark, he’d wrapped his hands around the child throat until he breathed no longer. Then, he’d disposed of the body, and proceeded to spend the rest of the night in a drunken stupor.
He’d killed the guard soon after, despite being reasonably sure the man knew nothing. Cersei couldn’t rest at night with the possibility of his knowledge looming over her head. The man had left behind a widow and two infant children.

Cersei hadn’t been bothered by either deed.

He’d never looked back, but why did his choices suddenly feel like a terrible weight on his shoulders? How old had that boy been? What became of that guard’s family?

His hands suddenly burned.

“Look at me!” Cersei screeched, waking him from his stupor, and tore off her robe. Her body was littered in bruises. Some new, others yellowed with age. His mouth went dry with rising anger as he scanned her up and down; her breasts and thighs bore the brunt of the damage. “Look at what that whore has done! My pig of a husband rages each night, and takes his anger out on me. All because his precious dog gave into that little bitch.”

Daenerys, pushing through the crowd, confronting Ned Stark. Apologizing before all the realm for her father’s evil. Jaime, who couldn’t even find the courage to speak against the things that disgusted him, had been awed at her daring.

“And now you as well, Jaime?” she asked, and her eyes filled with tears. “You hurt me as well? You choose someone else, as everyone has done?”

His heart was pounding at her tears, and he took a step closer, heart in his throat. He hated it when she cried. His strong sister, who no one else her pain. “No, Cersei, no.”

She buried her head in her hands, and he immediately enveloped her in his arms, trying to calm her. What had he been doing? How could he hurt her like this?

“You don’t love me anymore,” she keened, heart broken. “Like father, you’ve abandoned me.”

“No,” he said, nearly desperate. “I love you; you know I do.”

“You’re lying,” she sobbed, shaking. “You want her now.”

“I only got close to her for father,” he rushed out, struck by inspiration. Yes, yes this is how he could fix it. This is how he could protect Daenerys and still make Cersei happy.

She looked up, teary eyes widening. “What?”

He nodded. “Father tasked me with keeping an eye on her. Oberyn Martell has taken her bastard betrothed as his squire. You know father, he is always ten steps ahead of everyone.”

Cersei stared at him, eyes widening. “That’s why?” she breathed. Slowly, her tears were drying.

He nodded, exhaling. Yes, this is how he could fix it all.

“That’s why you went to Dragonstone? That why you left me? For father?”

Her eyes were so hopeful, he couldn’t bring himself to tell her that he’d only been charged with this task after he’d left. He just nodded.

“So you don’t want her?”

He shook his head, honestly disgusted by the idea of being attracted to a child. “Gods no.”
She shoulders slumped, and her body relaxed. She gave a breathless laugh. “Of course. Of course; as if she could possibly compare to me.”

She came closer to him, laying her head gently upon his chest. Jaime started to relax, hopeful that the storm had passed, that the sister he remembered from childhood would now return to him. *It was only an episode,* he thought uneasily. Cersei isn’t mad. He pressed a kiss upon her golden brow, silently apologizing for his ridiculous thoughts. Jaime drew her closer, careful of the bruises. Everything would be okay now.

“You love me?” she murmured, a queer quality to her voice. “Truly; me alone?”

“You alone. Only you.”

She exhaled slowly, and her body became pliant. She raised her lips and kissed him slowly, tongue pushing into his mouth. Languidly, they continued for many moments, and she walked him backwards until his keens met the bed. He sat, trailing his fingers down her side, then up to cup her glorious breast. What woman could ever compare with Cersei? He felt the warmth of her naked form, and his blood began to grow hot. *It’s been to long.*

She broke away from him, laughed when he tried to follow. She cupped his face, her green eyes guileless, smile sweet, and said, “Kill her for me, Jaime. Prove that you love me.”

He froze, shocked, but she held on. Her fingers dug into his hair, and she kissed him again, a brutal press of her mouth to his. When she pulled back, leaving him dazed, the look in her eyes was hungry, nearly fervently so. “You have to kill her, Jaime, please; she’ll take everything from me. Everything. She’ll be the death of us, of our children.” Her eyes were nearly gleeful; crazed.

Jaime blinked, confused. A sickness was growing in his stomach. “Cersei, I told you that father said —”

Her gaze grew fanatical, and she dug her nails in deeper. “You’ll never get close to her now; father’s orders are impossible. No, don’t you see? If we kill her, then everything is better. Father needn’t worry himself over such a small matter. If we kill her, we win. We win, not her!”

His hands fell away from her body, suddenly heavy as lead.

There was a spiteful twist to her lips, as if something Daenerys had done was a personal affront. Jaime had heard the rumors of a shirtless Stannis Baratheon carrying the girl across the palace. Whispers said he’d look bloodthirsty. That he hadn’t doubted. But the whispers also said that Daenerys Targaryen had been triumphant. He’d thought that part was only a rumor spread by Cersei to support her tale of events.

“Stannis sent her back to Dragonstone,” he argued desperately. “She’s no threat to us now. Leave it alone, Cersei. Come to bed; lets put this all behind us.”

“Don’t be a fool, Jaime,” she snapped, face twisted in a sneer. “She’ll be back! Don’t you see how she’d gathering power? How they flock to her, hoping she’ll take my place? She’ll kill us all! Already, she’s got Stannis Baratheon under her thumb! Don’t you see how he plots against me?”

He shook his head at her ranting, stunned.

“Kill her, Jaime!” she ordered. “Before she takes everything from us. If you love me, you will do this! *Bring me her head*.”

“*Bring me your father’s head, boy!*” Aerys II Targaryen cackled, the crazed sound echoing in the
silent throne room. “The proud Tywin Lannister, murdered by his own seed. Yes, that will be the ultimate victory. Go, bring me his head!”

How could that long-dead man’s eyes resemble Cersei’s this much? The fervor, the lust, the hunger in her gaze as she contemplated Daenerys death was exactly the same as the king’s gaze as he watched men and women burn.

Jaime felt nauseous.

Suddenly Ned Stark’s parting words filled his mind. Honorable Ned Stark, loved and trusted by the realm for his goodness. The reputation Jaime-the-boy had dreamed of; the reputation Jaime-the-man had envied. “I do not absolve you of your sins, Ser Jaime. I still believe that you should have stopped Aerys as he fell to madness…But when the time came, you acted with honor.”

Jaime pushed her away.

Cersei stumbled back. “Jaime?” Her body was still naked, still covered in bruises, and a part of him would always hurt to see such a sight. He would always love her alone. But he couldn’t sit here and watch her fall. He couldn’t pretend that she hadn’t just tried to use his love against him.

No, Jaime Lannister was no knight. He was no hero in a maiden’s song. He never would be.

His white armor was irrecoverably stained, and no amount of regret would wash it clean. His honor was a broken, twisted thing; so wounded that it was barely breathing. But it was alive nevertheless.

“I won’t do this, Cersei. I can’t.”

Then, as his sister screamed at him, voice shifting from anger to terror, Jaime got up and walked away.

*****

Ned Stark’s return to Winterfell had been tense. While he and Catelyn has largely patched things up between them, he’d forgotten how Benjen would feel about the whole thing. As far as his younger brother was concerned, Catelyn deserved to stay in Riverrun for the rest of her life. Ned’s attempts to bridge the gap between them were useless.

It was likely the two would never see eye to eye.

Benjen had remained another few days before returning to Moat Cailin. Before he’d left, Ned sought his brother out for some advice. He’d told him about Stannis’s proposition, about the stagnation of the North. He’d expected affront, perhaps even anger. Benjen loved their home fiercely, and the idea that it was stagnant was likely to insult him.

Contrary to expectations, Benjen had wholeheartedly approved of Stannis’s plans.

“There’s so much we could do, Ned, for our people. So much we could build! This aluminum is only a small part of it. We have lumber, rock, fish, untapped minerals in the leagues of unexplored mountains. I’ve been speaking so often with the architects; all are men of change, men of development. The Essosi, in particular, have much to say about the state of our lands, considering how they hail from massive cities that probably make King’s Landing seem like a ruin. Imagine all we could do.” Benjen’s eyes lit up, and Ned’s heart warmed at the genuine excitement in his brother’s eyes. “You ask for my advice, brother. I say make the alliance. If that is too much interaction with the south, then reject Lord Stannis, but let us look to the future ourselves. This would not be for us, not for riches or greed: it would be for our people.”
Those impassioned words had plagued Ned. He was trapped between them, and between a bone-deep weariness that protested such a massive undertaking.

But everywhere he turned, there were those who supported change. Maester Lewin gave tentative recommendations, applying his previously useless knowledge of economics, agriculture, and geography. He was very persuasive, using brief lessons from history to support how the North had once embraced innovation, so it would not be unprecedented.

For her part, Catelyn liked the idea of anything that could improve House Stark’s power. She spoke of increase security for their children, of how power and wealth could protect them. “We don’t have to follow the lead of the South, Ned. We can grow strong without offending the old gods or falling to petty greed.”

Conflicted, Ned Stark walked to the Weirwood to think under its blood red leaves, to ask the gods for some sign. Was he making a mistake, or was this a much-needed change for the North? They had stood strong for millennia. What threat could there be to warrant such a massive change?

His conflict had drawn him to the crypts. He lit a torch, picked a winter rose, and ventured down into the darkness. Lyanna’s statue he’d visited first, telling her of all that had changed since he’d left. Telling her of Daenerys Targaryen, the sister of the man she’d loved.

“If Rhaegar was like his sister, Lyanna, I understand how you could have fallen in love with such a man. There is something that draws people to her, a charisma we Northerners lack. I found myself rather fond of her. I’m sure that you, who dared to dress as a knight to punish some arrogant lords, would have enjoyed her as well.”

When he’d placed the blue rose upon her lap, Ned swore he’d seen a glimmer of a smile on her gray lips.

Next, he’d moved to stand before his father. He’d confessed that he’d never mourned them properly. He’d said that at times, he blamed Lord Rickard for everything that happened to their family, for taking them south and scheming. “Yet now I contemplate the same. Did you have this turmoil, father, when you first tried to bring us out of our isolation? Were you trying to protect us, to strengthen us?”

Finally, on a whim, Ned made one more visit. He went down, down, down into the deepest level of the crypt. It was sweltering down there, the rock half-collapsed, and statues all faceless and eroded by time. Nearly three hundred statues of Stark Lords graced the crypts. It took Ned eight hours to travel to the very first one, constructed in an alcove apart from the others, the wolf at his feet was so massive that Ned knew it had to be a direwolf.

The status’s face had long-since faded with time. The details of his body, sword, and furry companion were similarly gone. But here sat the very first of them, the founder of House Stark. What was plain so see was the long, think beard on the man’s face.

“Some say you are Brandon the Builder, who founded our house. Brandon, who built Winterfell, and the Wall. A man who was friend to giants and the Children of the Forest. Others say Brandon the Builder was simply a myth, and your true name was lost to time. I come here today to say that I have a choice before me. One that could destroy what you built, one that could crumble eight thousand years of legacy. Even if this act brings us strength and power, doing so may erode the North as we know it. You, who founded a dynasty; what words would you say to me?”

The statues, of course, remained silent, and Ned had never expected anything else. In truth, he’d come here on a whim. Perhaps if he saw the origins of his House, of his blood, he could better know
what choice to make. But the path was as murky as ever. With a sigh, the Lord of Winterfell turned away; he’d been missing for too long, and he knew they were probably worried about him.

As he turned, his foot grazed something hard before the statue’s feet. Surprised, he lowered the torch for a better look. There, carved at the first Stark’s feet, was a simple builder’s hammer, decorated with a surprisingly well-preserved etching of the Stark sigil.

With a reluctant laugh, Ned bowed his head before his ancestor, and made his way back up to his family. He emerged into the light covered in dust and cobwebs, squinting at the bright morning sunlight. He’d been gone over sixteen hours, having walked straight through the night.

He found the castle in panic, as expected, and got a passionate scolding from Catelyn, who gripped his tunic with shaking arms. After reassuring her and his children—feeling properly chastened by his abrupt behaviour—Ned returned to his room, exhausted. Catelyn bid him to rest for a while, and he gratefully complied.

A letter from Stannis Baratheon awaited him when he arose, and the story told within solidified his chosen path.

Chapter End Notes

So, I have no idea how long it would take to go down the crypts, or if it's even possible. Who knows, they could be so run down that the bottom level are buried. I also have no idea why the oldest are at the bottom, when logically you'd think they'd have started at the top and then dug deeper when they ran out of space. But, this is what canon sources say.

I estimated around 300 statues. That would mean every lord lived about 30 years.

Hope I kept Jaime properly grey. I don't want to paint him as a poor, misunderstood man. He has made a lot of bad choices, and those are all on him.
Gah, I'm sorry this took so long!! I re-wrote the middle of this chapter SIX times! It's such an important part, and every time I thought it was done, there was something that just didn't work! So, I avoided it... (And avoid the commenters in shame... ;_;).

Thank you to everyone who's asked if I'm okay! Love you guys <3

I hope you like it! :D

Lord Stannis,

I have read your missive about the events in court. Were the words from any other man, I believe I would have denied them outright. Had my son and your ward not necessitated years of discourse between us, I fear I would have remained ignorant of the state of the capital; willfully so. The news of the queen's actions has spread to my people. I have heard word from my brother that those at White Harbor are spreading outlandish tales. It is not that I doubted your story: Benjen contacted me of his own accord. He begged that I take action, and I find myself in agreement of its necessity.

The King Robert has become is alien to me; I always knew that he was an emotional man, but I could never conceive that he would take it to this degree. He has shamed himself with his inaction. Furthermore, he has dishonored a future daughter of the North. Targaryen or not, I cannot abide by this act. Benjen writes to me that my people are raging at the insult; we of the North take no pleasure in the humiliation of children, and seeing as she will be a lady of Moat Cailin, the action is a personal slight against us. You know well how little I care for politics and gossip, but I cannot stand back any longer. I will collaborate with your plan, Stannis, and justice will prevail.

Regarding the trade alliance you proposed, I will need more time before I can decide the outcome. You were correct in that the North is stagnant, and change is needed. Whether this change will include an interaction with the south will depend on my people. I do not need their leave to act, as you have said, but neither will I rule by tyranny. Thus, I have called a meeting of the lords in two month time. I will contact you then.

Regards,

Eddard

*****

Dear Daenerys,

We are currently guests of House Whent of Harrenhal. This time, we’re staying with the family rather than at an Inn. I assume that either this location was simply a convenience, or Prince Oberyn needs not hide his interactions this time. He plans to remain her for a month, or so he said when prodded, but I could very well change, knowing him. My days are long and filled with work. In the mornings, Domeric and I arise at dawn to train with Syrio. It’s a relief to have another person who
may occupy the Bravossi’s attention; I’m certainly covered in less bruises lately. Domeric doesn’t agree, however; he was rather shocked the first time Syrio disarmed him with a hard hit to the wrist. I doubt he’ll underestimate the slight man again.

Following that, we spend a few hours with the master-at-arms, practicing with bows, swords, and jousts. The prince often participates in these lessons, and he’s begun to teach me basic spear stances, although it’s not my preferred weapon. I am superior at the sword, but Domeric is a master at the joust. Even prince Oberyn was intrigued, and they joust often. Domeric has lost every time, but the prince says he’s improving remarkably. It takes longer and longer to unseat him.

Do you enjoy horse riding? Perhaps when we meet, we can travel our lands. I can show you the many things the crannogmen keep hidden from the world. In a way, the swamp is a beautiful place, if you know what to look for. It may not be the most desirable holding, in terms of physical beauty, but there is something special there, if only one takes the time to look. I hope it surprises you.

Anyways, after noon meal, we spend the rest of the day with maester Elridge. He’s been here for over two decades, and has seen so much. I asked him about the ancient history of Harrenhal, as I know your interest in the area. It is the largest castle in the Seven Kingdoms, finished in 2 BC by King Harren Hoare of the Iron Islands after he conquered the Riverlands. The construction was long and bloody, as the King all but enslaved his workers, as the Iron Islanders tend to do. Did you know how linked this place is with your family? In a way, Harrenhal is what sparked the Conquest. The last Storm King, Argilac Durrandon (Argilac the Arrogant) tried to marry his daughter to Aegon I in order to use your family to protect the stormlands against King Harren. Aegon refused, and Argilac grew angry and murdered Aegon’s messenger. I’m sure you’ve learned this in more detail than I, but my point is that it’s ironic how Harrenhal always seems to be the catalyst for so much change. The completion of the castle inadvertently sparked the Conquest three hundred years ago. Then, eleven years ago, the Tourney of Harrenhal was the source of the Rebellion, as it’s where your brother Rhaegar met my aunt Lyanna. [ blindly killed

I apologize, I realize this may not be a welcome topic.

Today, the castle is a decrepit ruin. Its five towers are crumbling, the top levels are too dangerous to venture up. Only the bottom levels are livable. Still, the position of Lord of Harrenhal is desirable, or so says maester Eldridge. The lands are large, rich, and fertile. The Whents—the seventh house to be lords of Harrenhal since the burning—are wealthy. Unfortunately, they are unlikely in life. Lady Shella lost her husband four years ago, and four of her sons sickened after. Now, only three children remain, the eldest son—Willhem—and the twins Markus and Ellena. I have heard they are in King’s Landing, so perhaps you know them.

I look forward to your next letter.

Yours,

Jon.

*****

Sending letters to Daenerys was a complicated endeavor. Not only did he have to carefully keep track of the ever-growing pile—and the ever-depleting space in his saddlebag—but he also had to send two letters in a row at times. One to tell her they were leaving, and one to tell her they’d arrived. Because he had much more space to fill than hers, Jon was often cognisant of what to put in each letter, and thus carefully recorded the events he thought she’d be most interested in. He always—always—took care to be detailed about their trip.
He sometimes read the hunger in her letters, hidden underneath descriptions of her day and the events around her. She wanted to change things, almost as much as she wanted to escape the things that needed changing. Jon understood that feeling in painful, secret ways. His letters were a window into a world closed off to her, and Jon—being a bastard, and thus aware of what that was like—tried his best to make her feel apart of his travels. Sometimes, he even imagined a small girl beside him on a white horse, racing with him and Domeric, laughing and carefree under the Prince’s casual yet careful watch.

It was an odd idea—he didn’t even know if she’d like horses. Sansa didn’t; or at least, she didn’t like riding fast.

He painstakingly recorded details of their trip he thought she may enjoy. Details of the roads and lands and people. He couldn’t write everything in the letters, of course; the raven could only carry so much. But he’d sometimes—in the half-awake times before bed—make up conversations between them, discussion between two curious children about worlds they’d never know. They could talk about the things he’d seen traveling around; the things she’d seen staying still.

He could tell her of Winterfell, and the Starks, and old Nan’s stories. She could tell him of Dragonstone, and what it was like to have grown up there, in her conquered ancestral home, under the care of Lord Stannis. He could speak about the Wall, of the chill of summer snows, of the grizzled state of the Watch. She could tell him of King’s Landing, of the royal family he’d only garnered snippets of ideas about, yet who evoked complicated feelings within him. He imagined speaking about Prince Oberyn and his frustrating idiosyncrasies—his whimsical yet purposeful directions, the way he’d tap his fingers against his leg when contemplating, the way he’d sometimes ruffle Jon’s hair and laugh when the boy accidentally amused him. She could tell him about Lady Myra, the woman who’d raised and loved her, and who peppered her letters.

*Does Lady Myra scorn me?* He was too hesitant to ask, because perhaps the lady did, but Daenerys wasn’t aware of it. If she knew that lady Myra’s feelings towards him were undesirable, would it alter her own? He didn’t think so, but he was no expert on women. Sometimes, he got caught up in thoughts of how she’d one day grow out of her childish acceptance of him and draw away when she finally realized what it really meant to be a bastard.

Vehemently pushing the unpleasant musings away, he forced his mind to happier things.

He could tell her about his uncle Benjen, and of the six bickering architects who constantly fought to enact their vision of Moat Cailin. She could tell him about her hopes for their castle, the things she wanted to do and change, the private laws she’d want to enact. He would tell her of Braavos, and they could talk of what she’d like to do, what she’d like to see. She could tell him of the places she wanted to go, the peoples she wanted to see, and perhaps, sometime in the future, they could leave Westeros behind for a few years and just *travel*.

Not as bastard and princess, or punishment and victim. Just as man and wife. As Jon and Daenyers.

These were the small things Jon Snow pictured talking to his future wife about, filled with a strange mix of hope—that she would enjoy their conversations—and trepidation—that he wouldn’t be able to string the words together properly, not having the time to plan his speech like he did when he wrote letters. That he would be frustratingly awkward in front of her, for he had little and less experience actually *talking* to a girl his own age.

Surely it would be different face to face than through letters. Surely it would be more difficult. For him, at least; he imagined her as someone that would have no problem whatsoever talking with him.

He enjoyed her interpretations of events, the details of the past and present that only she would tell
him. He was curious—too curious, maybe—about what was happening in the realm, in the capital. His mind inadvertently held onto interesting bits of politics and tried to understand them, to solve them and remake them anew. Sometimes, he’d lock himself in his head and contemplate what she told him, applying lessons from Maester Luwin’s mind to Robb.

Robb listened to politics and schemes with the dutiful attention of an heir. Jon listened almost in fascination, mind spinning with ideas he’d never dare to voice to anyone but Robb, being casual about it as if what he was contemplating was not important; was just a pastime. Robb had no patience for it, however. Machinations between Houses, trade, industry, innovation; these were things Jon Snow enjoyed thinking about. He contemplated the implications of a certain marriage match, the outcomes of an alliance, the challenges to mitigating a feud between rival lords. He enjoyed the mental challenge, even as he felt the brief tinge of shame knowing that such contemplations were not his place. It was the greed of a bastard, as Lady Catelyn would sometimes say, and he hated that she may be right.

Robb, a trueborn son, had no such interest in politics—which just supported his mother’s worries about Jon. Robb was much more fascinated by war strategy. While his blue eyes would quickly dull when Jon tried to discuss things like lumber, and metal, and change—“That’s not the North, Jon.”—his bother could spend hours mapping out imaginary wars, discussing armor and weapons and infantry and cavalry. Sometimes, in their youth, they’d take Maester Luwin’s maps of the continent and enact imaginary disputes—over land, resources, perhaps blood feuds—and take on the identity of rival lords past and present as they sought to conquer one another. They’d re-enacted ancient wars and rebellions time and again, using small stones to depict rival factions. Other times, they’d invent their own conflicts, purely for fun.

Often, their war could span weeks, hidden on a large blanket stored carefully under Robb’s bed. Hundreds of rocks, with unique carvings depicting different groups of soldiers, would litter the material in specific patterns. Sometimes, Jon won. Most times, Robb did. His brother, while having little patience for politics, had a head for war. Or maybe he just had the brashness of trying new things, making enormous, brilliant choices while Jon was more cautious and needed more time to think his strategy through.

*We’re good together, you and I. Had this been another life, I’d have kept you with me always, to help me rule. You know I’ve no head for politics.*

Jon appreciated the words, soaking up his brother’s love, even when he doubted their plausibility. Had Jon simply been a bastard, he’d have ended up gone from Winterfell, most likely on Lady Catelyn’s orders.

“Probably to the Wall, to die fighting or frozen,” he muttered, frowning. Carefully, he rubbed down the thin piece of wood he’d found with a harsh rock. Then he deposited the smooth, straight piece onto a pile of similar sticks beside him.

Beside him, Domeric looked up, brow raised. “What?”

Jon shook his head. “Just thinking what my life would have been like, had I become a Brother of the Night’s Watch.”

Domeric looked down, frowning as he continued to smooth a rock into a sharp point using a small whetstone. “I’ve read stories of the Brotherhood—of what it used to be. Shame, what’s become of it. A bunch of criminals. My father would regularly empty his dungeons and send them north.”

*Probably missing a few pieces of themselves,* Jon thought. But he didn’t bother to say it aloud. Domeric, perhaps more than any other person, knew what his father was. It didn’t stop the tie of
blood between them, the loyalty he had towards the pale-eyed lord.

“Castle Black and Eastwatch are nearly as run down as Harrenhal,” Jon muttered, although it was a gross exaggeration. He may have learned a lot about the realm and its people at the Watch, but he’d not miss it. Only Maester Aemon did he occasionally recall with fondness.

Domeric shot him a look, blinking slowly. He sometimes did that when trying to figure out if Jon was being truthful. The younger boy was sometimes prone to dramatics, Domeric had found. Jon didn’t appreciate the observation, less so after Obeyrn had laughed himself sick.

“Well, you’re not a normal bastard,” Domeric said, with a faint smile. “Count your blessings.”

“I don’t know,” he replied, matching Domeric’s smile, ignoring his instinctive anger at that word. “I rather think I look good in black.”

The elder boy chuckled. “Save your preening for your wife, Jon. She’ll reinforce that ego of yours well enough. Though she’ll likely dress you in whatever color she wants. Probably spend hours looking at you, her pretty husband.”

Jon scowled at him, irritated to feel his cheeks heat. He chucked one of the sticks at Domeric, who batted it away before it could make contact.

“Shut up,” he muttered, his blood still painting his ears. What was it with other men? They either made a point to call him pretty, or gave him advice about his wife. Busybodies, the lot of them.

Domeric’s eyes flashed with amusement before he ducked back down to his work, humming some song from the Eyrie. Jon still hadn’t gotten used to the moon-pale eyes on the other boy. It reminded him too much of Lord Bolton.

Taking the boy’s cue, he got back to his own work, the pile of smooth sticks steadily growing. He enjoyed Domeric’s company because the other boy didn’t feel the need to converse all the time; often, they could spend hours in companionable silence. Originally, he’d felt trepidation, but eventually found that Domeric’s presence was a refreshing change; his calm serenity was a needed contrast to Oberyn’s relentless energy and Syrio’s dedicated drive. Plus, the boys challenged one another, competing in everything from horses to swords to archery. Domeric seemed to enjoy the challenge, and—unlike Theon, for example—didn’t seem to hold any hostility to losing. He competed for the sake of it, more than for the win.

Slowly, Jon was growing more comfortable, and a bit hopeful about his future relationships with the other lords and heirs to the north. Perhaps being a bastard wasn’t as horrible as the Lady Catelyn made it out to be.

Currently, the boys were in another silent competition, seeing who could complete their jobs first. The Bastard of Winterfell and the Bolton Heir were currently deep in the woods that were clustered on the north-eastern shore of the God’s Eye lake, just a few hours south-east of the great crumbling castle of Harrenhal.

They’d arrived at House Whent sixteen days ago to the sight of the massive ruin, and Jon had been awed by his first real glimpse that dragons were actually real. Faced with the destruction of this immense castle, he knew that only an inferno delivered by air could have decimated it to this degree. Oberyn’s party was housed in a set of room across from the family’s private keep, in a small building that seemed to have escaped the destruction. It used to house servants, Oberyn told him. Now, it held some of the largest remaining rooms.
Oberyn had sent them off the day before with vague instruction to return with a hundred arrows and to “take care not to die”. Jon took the abrupt order in stride, while Domeric was more bemused. While the elder boy had gotten used to travel, he’d yet to acclimate to Oberyn Martell.

“Ah, how I love to see that shocked look when you spoiled lordlings get your first taste of life,” Oberyn chucked, watching Domeric struggling to light a fire. “I should have taken on a highborn squire years ago, if only for the entertainment.”

Jon chuckled a bit at the memory.

“Is he truly like that?” Domeric had asked later, looking to where the prince was reclining on a field of flowers, lazily enjoying the sun.

“Worse,” Jon muttered. “He’s been mild so far. Just wait until we end up in Essos, somehow. Mayhap Sothoros, this time.”

Domeric blinked slowly, faintly alarmed.

Okay, so perhaps he was a bit dramatic, Jon acknowledged sullenly. But he enjoyed the feeling of being the ‘elder’ between them, the one with experience in the ‘dealing with and handling of Dornish Princes’.

On Oberyn’s orders, they’d set out at dawn and headed for the woods. Upon arrival, they’d made a contest of the task, seeing who could make 50 arrows first. They’d found sticks, rocks, and feathers and brought them back to a clearing, their horses grazing nearby. They’d taken a break for lunch, and now it was near sunset. So far, they were evenly matched, and only had half a dozen more each to go. His hands ached, and blisters were forming, and he knew Domeric fared no better.

“Would you have really been sent to the Wall?”

He looked up again, but Domeric’s attention remained on his work.

“Not sent,” he corrected, a bit annoyed. “I’d have chosen it. I thought about it when I was younger; it’s an honorable path.” The words sounded hollow.

The person Jon was now would never be able to be satisfied at the wall. He wanted things. But then, in another life, it would have been a likely destination.

“‘Honorable’?” Domerie’s words were thoughtful, but tinged with doubt. “It’s a prison colony. Men go there to die.”

“It’s an atonement,” Jon insisted, “for their crimes. That’s honorable. They protect the realm.”

Domeric raised his brow, doubtful. “Honor is a choice, Jon. Those men have none. They’re killed for deserting.”

Jon looked away, frowning. He rubbed the bark off the branch in his hand harder than necessary. “At least everyone is equal at the Watch. Birth doesn’t matter.”


Jon grit his teeth. “So, some men are just better. Just because of a name? while others deserve...less?”
Why did he ask that? Did he expect a denial? That was the way of their world; Domeric was right.

His pale-eyed heir shrugged. “That’s the way of our world. Houses, blood… names.”

Names. How many times had Jon wished his father would ask the king to legitimize Jon, to make him a Stark in truth. But as long as he was a threat to Robb and Sansa and Arya and Bran…

A memory: playing with Robb in Winterfell’s great courtyard. The boys would yell out names of ancient heroes, and then do battle in their names. One day, almost a year ago, Jon had declared himself the ‘Lord of Winterfell.’ But rather than go along with it, Robb automatically shaken his head and said it was impossible, because Jon was bastard-born. You can never be lord of Winterfell. You’re not a Stark.

Yes, names mattered.

He tried to push the memory away, ducking against the sudden angry moisture in his eyes. The branch in his hands snapped under the sudden pressure, and Jon hurled it away. It took him a few moments to compose himself, and Domeric didn’t interrupt. He was a perceptive person, quiet and patient. He never shamed Jon when the younger sometimes grew melancholy. Domeric, who’d gotten close to him because he wanted to learn more about bastards…

“Young bastard brother. Would your father ever legitimize him?”

Jon wanted to take the words back as soon as they escaped. Domeric’s head shot up, blinking in surprise. “What?”

“Would your father legitimize him? If he could, somehow,” he said again, unwilling to let it go now. “And if he did, what would you do?”


Jon looked away, shoulders slumping. What had he really been expecting?

“Ramsay lives in the village, with his mother. My father takes care of them both. When I return, I’ll ask father to bring them into our home, as I’ve said. He may refuse, of course. Still, when Ramsay’s of age, father will find him some position. He’s already made plans for such.”

Jon looked up. “Position? Like what?”

Domeric shrugged nonchalantly. “I don’t know. A squire? A master-at-arms? Perhaps an apprentice in some profitable trade. I only know that he’ll give Ramsay enough gold to live the life he wishes. Perhaps in Essos; I hear they have little interest in names there.” He sounded bemused by the idea.

“Not to the Wall?” Jon asked faintly.

Domeric didn’t meet his eyes, continuing to sharpen the arrowhead. “That’s a punishment, Jon. Everyone knows what the Watch is like.”

I didn’t.

“No possessions, no wife, no children. Just the promise of death.” Domeric shook his head. “Why would any man allow his son to go to such a place, when other options exist? Being born a bastard is not the child’s fault.”
Jon swallowed painfully, his throat suddenly dry.

He knew that the north differed from the south in that way; while Lady Catelyn’s gods saw him a cursed from birth, the old gods and the northerners saw him more as a stain on his father’s honor. The Bastard of Winterfell, Eddard Stark’s only shame.

“I would have chosen the Wall,” Jon insisted. “I would have. My father would not have forced me.”

But would he have told me what the Wall is like? Or would I have traded my life away on some old tale of honor and heroics? No, no! The Watch is an honorable choice; they protect the realm.

Father wouldn’t have let me go there without warning…

Jon bit the inside of his cheek hard enough to bleed, and forced himself to concentrate on his work, trying to push away his sudden turmoil. Brutally, he shoved the painful thoughts from his head. He was contemplating another life, and it would do nothing but waste time.

His father had never offered legitimacy, but he’d offered his home, his regard, his acknowledgment. More than most bastards ever got. He’d grown up in a castle, with a brother who loved him—You’re not a Stark, Jon—and raised to be a lord—to shame a princess—and it was more than many had.

The night’s watch had taught him that, if nothing else.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Domeric glance up briefly, but the older boy said nothing more. The returned to Harrenhal in silence.

*****

They’d returned to find the castle busier than they’d left it. Carriages piled high with chests were being led into the courtyard, and dozens of guards were making their way towards the barracks. Jon raised a curious brow, looking around as they entered the castle, let in by the guard at the main gate.

“The men all wear the House Whent sigil,” Domeric noted aloud. Jon nodded, having seen the same thing himself.

“I think the other children likely returned from the capital,” Jon speculated. He nodded over to the carts. “It would explain the number of chests.” Jon knew they’d been sent to the King’s Landing for various reasons, one of which being marriage. He wondered why they’d have returned so abruptly.

They made their way to their chambers, and Jon listened curiously to the bits and pieces of conversations between the returning guards and servants and those who’d remained at Harrenhal.

“…through the castle! She was crying, the whole time, poor girl…”

He and Domeric both heard that one, and frowned after the servant.

“…was prosperous, at least, in the Mad King’s time,” someone muttered, and Jon did a double take when he processed the words. The washerwoman who’d said it disappeared into the castle.

“…Lady Ellena couldn’t possibly stay in such a place! Why, the shame of it…”

“…Lord Tywin! They say he’s traveling to…”

“…say the King laughed,” a handmaiden was saying to her avid crowed, scandalized. “He came to court and toasted the queen…” Gasp met her words, as they hung on her every word. An elder woman appeared behind them, yelling, and they scattered.
Jon stared after them. A strange, sick feeling was gathering in his gut. A horrible premonition that raised the fine hairs on the back of his neck. He wasn’t aware that he’d jerked to a halt, right there in the middle of the busy yard, until a group of guards pushed him out of the way as they passed. Domeric tried to tug him along, but both boys froze when the guards’ conversation registered.

“…a Targaryen, after all,” a guard gaffed, smirking. “They’re all mad. Didn’t surprise me that the girl—”

He jerked to a halt, and his group as well. They turned, and say Jon there, gripping his cape in bloodless hands. Domeric stood beside him, silent.

“What are you talking about?” Jon demanded. “What happened to Dae—the Targaryen?”

Annoyed, the man jerked his cape away. “Who do you think you’re talkin’ to, boy? Yellin’ like that?”

The other men drew closer. “What’s wrong with this kid?”

“Listen here—”

Jon surged forward with a startling burst of speed. He reached up without warning and gripped the collar of the guard’s cloak, and yanked it down. The man pitched forward with a surprised yelp, his neck suddenly constricted by the fabric, and Jon pushed his face up close. The other men around froze, astonished by the skinny boy’s sudden strength, but Jon focused only on the man in his hands. Domeric blinked slowly, brows raised but not surprised.

“What happened to Daenerys?” Jon hissed, teeth clenched tightly. He pulled the wide-eyed man in closer, boring into his eyes. “Tell me.”

His thoughts were going a million leagues a minute. He’d known her response was late! The raven should have reached King’s Landing—what was happening—did she need help—what had the king toasted—why was Tywin Lannister—

He was pushed brutally away, the guard having finally snapped out of his shock. Jon hit the ground hard, grunting. He immediately moved to scramble up, and Domeric surged forward in support.

“You crazy little—!” The guard drew his leg back, no doubt to kick the boy, but he didn’t get the chance to before a large, tanned hand clamped onto his neck from behind.

“Would you mind explaining what you have raised a hand to my squire?” the velvet tinged with poison voice asked. The guard gurgled when the hand tightened.

The other men turned around, and Jon used the opportunity to raise, taking Domeric’s hand to help. He felt the mud coating his clothes, but didn’t care. He met Oberyn’s raised brow behind the guard, and distantly noted the anger on the Dornishman’s face.

“Let ‘im go, you bloody foreigner!” one of the men sneered, taking a threatening step towards the prince. “‘Afore I teach you—”

Jon ignored them; he only had eyes for the man in Oberyn’s grip. He tried to step forward, to demand his answers, heart still pounding with a sickening intensity, but was interrupted. Domeric gripped his arm to halt him just as another man—the captain of the guard—noticed the commotion and hurried over, apologizing to the prince and yelling at his men.

The men walked away, grumbling, and Jon tried to follow. But suddenly Oberyn was there, in his
path. Jon tried to push him away, eyes still on the retreating figures, before the prince gripped his chin and forced the boy to meet his eyes. Jon wondered what he looked like, aware that he was breathing heavily, horrible scenarios and worry in his gut.

“Come, and I will tell you what happened to the little dragon,” Oberyn said, and for once his voice was serious, quiet. Jon stopped trying to follow the men, eyes finally focusing on Oberyn. Nodding at the boy’s attention, Oberyn stepped away smoothly. Jon pulled away from Domeric, whose hand was still around Jon’s arm, and the boys hurried after the prince.

They walked briskly across the castle, Jon still hearing bits of conversation, before entering the large wall-encased training yard. Oberyn barked out an order to the men training there, and, startled to hear the lazy prince sounding so commanding, they obeyed. The master-at-arms protested briefly, but a savage glare from Oberyn silenced him. The men were all ushered out, grumbling in irritation and shooting them curious glances.

“Wait there,” he ordered Jon, pointing to the center of the cleared space. “Domeric, close the gate. No one enters.”

Oberyn took two practice blades, one much shorter and build for a boy’s hand, from the pile of weapons in the shed. He threw the weapon at Jon.

Then, raising his own weapon, the prince told Jon Snow everything.

The younger boy stood there, the story echoing in his ears, sickened.

“The queen dragged her naked through the castle, and threw her at Lord Stannis’s feet. She was covered in blood,” Oberyn told him, brutally honest. “Robert Baratheon laughed.”

“That’s a lie!” Jon spat, nearly desperate. “The…the king surely…my father’s friend wouldn’t have —!”

“He did nothing. Your precious king has done nothing but entertain himself for years. That is who Robert Baratheon is. That is who your father put upon the throne!”

“No!” Jon snarled. His heart was a twisted mess of emotions. Anger, worry, disgust, denial. They fought for dominance; they tried to rip him apart. “You’re manipulating me!” Jon spat. “That’s what you always do—that’s what—”

“I tell you the truth, boy!” Oberyn replied, savagely. “That’s what I always do.”

“To use me! To use us! All of you just—just always—you all try to—hurt and-and use!”

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“I tell you the truth, boy!” Oberyn replied, savagely. “That’s what I always do.”

“To use me! To use us! All of you just—just always—you all try to—hurt and-and use!”

“Yes,” Oberyn hissed. “In this world, you are either a player or a pawn, you either hurt or get hurt. Come then,” barked Oberyn, raising his weapon. “You are angry, yes? Then channel that rage.”

Jon didn’t need further prompting, running forward with the sword raised. An amalgamation of styles united in his small body, until a style that was uniquely his own emerged. The battle was brutal, and Jon didn’t bother to try and keep from truly hurting Oberyn.

He wanted someone to bleed.

He couldn’t admit to himself just who he hated at that moment. Just how close his thoughts were to treason. So Oberyn was as good a target as any—better, even. Because the prince was always after something. Was not above using this news to further his goals. And Jon knew it.
You are either a player or a pawn, you either hurt or get hurt.

With a scream, he thrust his sword brutally against the princes, the screech of metal on metal resonating. Again and again and again.

The sun made its way across the sky, reaching closer and closer to the horizon as the two sparred, practice swords colliding brutally. He lost all sense of time, his anger a terrible, horrible thing that eclipsed all else.

A crying girl, covered in blood, paraded before a laughing man seated on a stolen throne.

She was all alone.

Eventually, exhausted, Jon collapsed onto his knees, using the sword to hold himself up. He panted, covered in sweat, limbs shaking. Before him, Oberyn’s shadow stretched long, covering him completely. The prince was on his feet, breathing hard, but standing; victorious.

Jon was too young, too weak to defeat him.

Player or pawn.

“I want—I want to go to King’s Landing—I want to—”

“No.”

He looked up, glaring through dark, sweat-drenched locks.

“You are nothing, Jon Snow,” the prince hissed, getting down on one knee. “You have no power, no support. How can you protect her? Or will you simply go there, useless, and hold her as she weeps?”

“She’s stronger than that,” Jon retorted, but didn’t dispute the other points. The words burned.

“Yes, she is. But how much longer will she have to be—surrounded by those snakes? How much longer until something worse happens, and the king just laughs?”

“I can—I can…”

“Does she tell you of how the crown prince torments her? Of how he covers her body in welts of bruises, but she can do nothing to stop him lest the Queen torments her? Does she tell you how the king, when in her presence, sneers—calls her ‘dragonspawn’?”

Her first letter, her entirety to him: I know that people are really mean to me here… please be a nice person.

“Shut up!” Jon shook, swallowing hard. His exhausts muscles screamed. “When we’re in our own castle, she’ll be—”

“Safe?” Oberyn asked, almost mocking. Jon shot him a hateful glare. “And if the King—be it this one or the next—one day decides to come to your home, to take his vengeance against the dragons—your wife, your children—will you deny him, Jon Snow? Will you be able to?”

The sun finally dipped below the horizon.

“My father—”

“Would betray his king—taint his honor—for his bastard?”
“Lord Stannis—!”

“Has his own family to worry about. And even so, he no allies, few men.”

Jon shook his head. That wasn’t true—Stannis would fight for her. He would. But would it be enough?

“Will you wait for others to protect your family, Jon Snow? Is that the man you’ll be?”

Jon knew the prince was manipulating him. He knew it. But knowing did nothing to stop the poisonous words from seeping into his blood. Oberyn had gotten to know him too well.

“I’ve never even met her,” Jon whispered, slumping. “Your whole tactic depends on me caring about her. Maybe I don’t.”

‘Legitimacy doesn’t matter, I will take you into my family. You will be a dragon, too.’

Oberyn stayed silent. They both knew it was a lie. Jon had given the prince more than enough proof of his feelings for Daenerys. What a fool he was.

This is a lesson, he lectured himself. Guard your weaknesses. Keep them close, secret; or they’ll make a pawn out of you.

In the shadows, Domeric watched them, moon-pale eyes serious. There was no condemnation, no alarm at this nearly-treasonous conversation he’d just witnessed. And Jon became aware that Domeric, too, was dangerous. Oberyn had let him stay for a reason. He would have to write his father, tell him to watch Roose Bolton carefully.

Oberyn reached into his inner pocket and took out a slightly crumpled letter, sealed with a familiar sigil. Jon trained his eyes on it. That small paper was as effective as a chain made of Valyrian steel. For a moment, he resented it; resented her.

Resented his own burning desire for belonging, which she dangled before him like water in a desert. A gift and a curse.

“I hate you, prince,” Jon muttered, curling his hand into the dirt, digging his nails in deep. He looked up, meeting dark, sober eyes. He could have sworn there was something like regret on the Dornishman’s face.

“Many do, broody boy.” The prince offered his hand, waiting.

Jon reached up and took it, allowing the prince to pull him to his feet.

*****

Dear Jon,

Writing letters to you is getting more and more complicated. There is so much I wish to say, but never enough space. When I meet the Prince, I shall yell at him for dragging you around the continent when it would be so much simpler for us both if you just stayed still! (Would it be very rude to ask you to kick Prince Oberyn for me?) I love the glimpses of Westeros, and your stories of the places paint a vivid picture, but it would be wonderful if we didn’t have to wait weeks at a time between letters. I have so much I want to talk to you about. You will indulge me when we meet. For hours we will talk, until you’ll probably find me very annoying. Prepare yourself, Jon Snow.
First, I must say sorry that it took so long to respond. We are back at Dragonstone, and it took a while for your letter to reach me from King’s Landing. I am traveling nearly as often as you are, although I wish the destinations were more varied. You will hear the story of what happened, I’m sure. It will be terrible, and I know it will have become some larger story. I knew they will paint me as either a victim, or mad. But I am not either, Jon Snow, so do not dare pity me.

I have been calling myself a dragon for many years. It’s been a mask, a cape I used to protect myself. But this is the first time I’ve really felt it, the first time I’ve felt the dragon’s blood in my veins, the blood of conquerors.

Do not pity me, Jon Snow. I did not break and I did not submit. I won. And soon my tormentor will be silenced.

Now, I will try my best to respond to both of your letters here. I have never given much thought to development, not in such detailed ways as you. I think it’s a wonderful trait, and listening to your excitement brought a smile to my lips. You always make me smile, Jon, even when you don’t try to. When I think of change, it is large of scale, but vague. I want a King’s Landing with proper sewer systems, like those in Essos. I want a court filled with people from all over planetos, learning together and sharing idea. There are so many things we could learn from other places, so much we could use in order to create something better. The politics of Dorne, the lessons from the Citadel (wouldn’t it be interesting if anyone could be a maester?), the honor of the North, the beauty of the Reach, the smiths from Tyrosh, the fabrics of Pentos, the architecture from Myr, the commerce from Braavos. There are so many wonderful things in this world, but we remain isolated from them, mistrustful when instead we should embrace what the world may offer us.

Do I sound very outlandish? Maester Cressen is amused by my ideas, but he says that change is very difficult. But how can you know that when no one tries? Even if they have to use force to do it. I admit, I don’t know how I would enact these changes—I will leave the detailed thinking to you, Jon—but would it not make for a more interesting life?

I should like to meet Lord Domeric. I have Tyene as my best friend. She is the maid I told you about, in the other letter. Did I ever tell you why she is with me? May have questioned how a lowborn orphan girl became my handmaiden. She saved me from an assassin years ago, and cousin Stannis gave her this position in gratitude. She is my confidant and I share everything with her. Perhaps lord Domeric will be that for you.

Harrenhal sounds like a fascinating place. There are stories of it in King’s Landing: they say whoevver becomes Lord of that place is doomed. They say the phantom of King Harren haunts the place, that he hates anyone whom reaps the benefits of his efforts. Perhaps that why the place has been so terrible to my family. And do not be hesitant to speak of Rhaegar. I know his faults, I know what he did. Although I will say that Myra tells me he was not the type to hurt women, that he was kind. But then, he did abandon his wife and children. Is it very selfish of me to wish he was still alive, regardless of his sins? What is it like, having a brother? I have Steffon, whom I love, but is it the same?

When we meet, let’s talk about many things. Perhaps while riding though our lands, just us; no escorts. I have a beautiful silver mare that I’ve named Moonlight. She’s temperamental, but I wanted her as soon as I saw her, although cousin Stannis was hesitant. He told me it would be difficult to ‘break her,’ but I didn’t want to do that. I spent many days in the stables, reading my lessons to her, feeding and brushing her. She’ll never be tame, but I can ride her now. Sometimes, you have to be gentle with wild things.

Write me soon.
Dear Dany,

Lady Whent’s children returned from the capital; many Houses are calling their daughters back from court. They say it’s no longer safe there for children, that the royal family is getting increasingly unpredictable. I’m relieved that Lord Stannis sent you back to Dragonstone.

We leave Harenhal in the morning: our next destination is the Antlers, the seat of House Buckwell. Over the next four months, we’ll be in King’s Landing. Syrio will part with us there. I’d hoped to meet you, Dany. It would have been a surprise: I wanted to give you the pin I bought in Braavos. But now I want you to promise me that you will stay away from King’s Landing.

The Whents brought back the story, or a dozen versions of it, of what the queen did. I won’t ask you what happened, but maybe one day we can talk about it. Would it scare, Dany, to know that it took three hours of sparing against the prince to dull my anger? No, you wouldn’t cry or cower from such a thing. You took on a queen, and you won. I believe you when you say you’ll win again, Dany. The dragons bow to no one.

But even dragons still need allies. A fallen princess and a bastard boy. Alone, we’ll be swallowed. I wish you’d never had to survive that place, that we could grow up, happy and safe. But we’ll always be under their shadow, won’t we? Anyone of our blood will.

One day, we’ll ride through our lands, no escorts in place—we won’t need them—and grow old in peace. We’ll spend hours talking about change, about making our lands into something that the world will envy. Into a land that is new and ours alone, a mix of cultures and peoples and ideas.

In exchange for your name, I give you this promise: I will protect you, Daenerys Targaryen. We will be happy.

Yours,

Jon.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to MagnusXXZ! Thank you for being such a loyal reader :D
**Wolf's Law**

Chapter Notes

I bring to you, a new PoV! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dear Jon,

Your rage doesn’t scare me. It is very strange to say that, instead, it comforts me? Like a reflection I didn’t know was missing. And your promise…Jon, I can’t tell you what it meant to me. I cried and laughed at the same time. Tyene was eyeing your letter as if contemplating the best way to steal it!

I’m glad to see the prince has finally shared more of his plans with you. But don’t trade anything for that information, Jon. My name casts a shadow over us, and it spans all of Westeros. Allies are important even for dragons, but I love your sweetness more. I don’t want that gone if it’s the price of your oath. Cousin Stannis has a loyal man named Ser Davos Seaworth as his bannerman. Ser Davos was a smuggler in the past, and he saved my cousin from starvation during the siege. He tells me that there are always multiple ways to reach your goal, even if you can’t see them at first. Sometimes, you even have to make your own opening. The prince may be a good man, but he is highborn; Myra says to never trust anyone outside of family. King’s Landing has shown me that.

I will stay away from King’s Landing, I promise—although I hate that they’ve robbed me of meeting you. Many of my friends have left, anyway, and there is little for me there. Also, Myra wouldn’t let me go back even if I wanted to (which I don’t). We won’t return until cousin Stannis calls for us. I can’t tell you what his plan is, lest someone read it, but know that the punishment is my idea. I want vengeance, and I won’t apologize for it.

I hope this letter finds you well at the House Buckwell. Until we meet.

Yours,

Dany

*****

Dear Dany,

We arrive at House Buckwell to find this letter waiting for us. It may be my imagination, but I think the seal was broken. Even this, they try to take from us. I met Ser Jarman Buckwell at the Wall; he was sent there after his family supported the Targaryens during the Rebellion. I didn’t think much of him then.

I will take Ser Davos’s advice seriously, and look for other paths whenever I can. I am a son of the North, if nothing else, and when we meet it will be with my honor intact. I have a plan, Dany, but it’s foolhardy at best. I wrote to Lord Howland Reed for aid. As you know, the crannogmen know the secrets of the swamps more than another other. Perhaps there is something they can do to help us. I just hope I didn’t insult Lord Reed. He offered to foster me, had I would have chosen him had the prince not arrived, so perhaps he will be willing to help.
The closer we get to the crownlands, the poorer the villages seem, Dany. They say the King is raising taxes often, and more of their products are being demanded by their overlords. There are whispers in taverns that the crown is in trouble. We came across a pack of bandits harassing a family during the trip, and intervened. They allowed us to stay the night, and shared stores of how common it’s getting. As King’s Landing grows and taxes rise, fewer people are able to support themselves and turn to crime. Many are migrating south in search of other work, while others have chosen to hire a guard to help protect their homes. The king remains popular, however; many see him as the savior who ended the Mad King’s tyranny. But prince Oberyn says hunger is singularly powerful when it comes to changing peoples’ opinions.

Our hosts weren’t enthused by our presence, and only grudgingly did they allow Domeric and I access to the Maester. Domeric didn’t mind, however; they have an extensive library and a large music room. He spends much of his evenings in there playing the harp. It’s a soothing sound to read to, although he can’t sing at all. I just wish he’d stop trying to make me do it; I regret indulging him the first time. Sometimes, he’s like the embodiment of the perfect knight; although he’s much too cool to be gallant like in the songs. He’s defiantly a Bolton.

We’re only remaining here for a few days, likely not long enough for another raven to arrive. We’re to go to House Rykker next, at Duskendale. We should keep our letters casual from now on, Dany, unless we absolutely must tell the other something. I can’t wait to get to Dorne, but at this rate, it really will take years.

Yours,
Jon.

*****

A frustrated scream precluded the sudden opening of the door. The wood banged against the wall, and Benjen startled, looking up from his book, eyes wide. Lyanna strode inside, fuming, in her pretty—girly—dove-grey dress, her dark hair all done up and held in place with silver combs. She looked beautiful and feminine and utterly lovely; she also looked nothing like his elder sister. She slammed the door shut after her, jaw clenched tightly.

Benjen, who was seated against his headboard, put down the book on his nightstand, beside the lit candle. The fourteen-year-old boy tilted his head, watching his fifteen-year-old elder sister pace angrily. It was an increasingly common sight; she passionately hated the south.

“He’s an insufferable, miserable, disgusting swine!” she screeched, reaching up to tear one of the combs from her hair. One by one the ornaments clanged onto the floor, discarded like waste as she fought to free her hair. Finally, she shook out the curling mass with a relieved sigh, and then she tried to reach behind her back and untie the dress, struggling to reach. “Not even Bran is so annoying, Benny! Not even Bran! On and on and on he went, talking about himself and how amazing he is at everything, about how his sons—and he ‘expects’ at least four—will be warriors just like him. How his daughters will be beauties, just like me—because what I look like is all he cares about—but he was at least generous enough to ‘let’ me decide how many girls I wanted, because ‘raising girls is a woman’s job’!”

She gave another frustrated scream when she couldn’t undo the dress, wiggling around with one arm trying to reach behind her back. Muttering a curse—Ben snorted—she gave up and glared down at her bosom, which was pushed up ridiculously high and on full display. She’d complained, often, how the corset they made her wear cut into his ribs and made it hard to breath, but their father was insistent that they respect these southerners’ sensibilities. “It was all I could do not to smash his face in with one of those ridiculous ornate goblets just to shut him up! But father was glaring at me as if...
he knew and Ned looked so gods damned happy—"

She finally looked at Benjen, who was trying his best not to snicker. “Shut up, Benny!”

He straightened, clearing his throat, and pressed his lips together seriously, nodding. *Don’t laugh, if you laugh, she’ll thrash you!* And she would; they’d been at Harrenhal for eight days so far, and every day she’d complain about her betrothed—only to Benjen—and should he laugh at all she’d smack him. His sister was not above expressing her displeasure with her brothers through violence.

Brandon had ensured she knew *exactly* how to handle herself. The eldest brother may be hot-headed, obsessed with his dick, and enjoyed women and drink a bit too much, but he took his baby sister’s safety seriously. He’d taught her to ride—and she could outride them *all*—swordfight, joust, and handle herself with a bow. Most of all, Brandon wasn’t above giving her a crude and detailed lesson on the male anatomy—specifically the areas that were most vulnerable. Ben's slight, delicate-looking sister was quite dangerous, and had the fire to see her actions through. It was how she’d managed to defeat those knight in the joust four days ago, identity hidden behind her laughing shield.

Ben *did* feel bad for his sister, for how unhappy she was with her betrothed, but father had already decreed it. Lord Rickard had expectations for his daughter, and already bemoaned everything Brandon secretly taught her.

“I’m sure he’s not as bad as all that, Lya,” he said, trying to placate his irate sister. Benjen didn’t know what to think of Robert Baratheon; he was loud and boisterous, but so was Bran. Ned certainly liked him, and Benjen trusted his brother’s word. Ned wouldn’t be friends with a bad guy.

Benjen had only been around Lyanna’s betrothed a few times, but he didn’t have much interest in the things the other boys did. He preferred reading about the strange cultures of the world. His current book was about the Great Empire of the Dawn—the legendary precursor of the Yi Ti Empire—and the tale of the Amethyst Empress, who was killed by the Bloodstone Emperor, a usurper of her own blood. The book described the temples of Yi Ti, that had the story carved into the dress of a huge statue of the Empress, which had massive amethysts for eyes. With her dying breath, the Empress had cursed the world to face a terrible darkness every few millennia. Legend said one day she would be reborn to take back her birthright and conquer the world, ending the Curse of the Long Night forevermore. When Ben grew up, after Lya and Bran were married, he’d take a ship and go see the statue for himself.

Well, that is if Lyanna every made it to the altar. His sister was a flight risk if he’d ever seen one.

She was resistant to *any* marriage—she wanted to be a *knight*. Benjen didn’t really see the problems with her dreams, but their father had made it clear that it wasn’t in Lyanna’s future. She’d marry Robert and become Lady of Storm’s End. Ben would miss her, although he’d never say such an embarrassing thing aloud!

She stalked towards him, and sat with a huff on the bed, back towards him. “Undo these miserable ties. If I have to spend one more *second* in this torture device, I’ll rip it off and walk *naked* through this ruin. Let them all talk, see if I care!”

Knowing she was likely serious—if only to prove that she *would*—Benjen obediently started pulling at the strings, and carefully opening the dress. “The corset too,” she ordered, and he grumbled. The white, bone-lined material was held together with dozens of small hooks, so he hunkered down in resignation, knowing it would take a while. These southern were such strange people, creating these impossible clothes. Finally, after many minutes, he succeeded, smiling triumphantly. “Done!”

But Lyanna didn’t move, and that’s when he realized she was slumped forward, head bowed.
“Lya?”

She didn’t respond, only hunching lower and raising her legs to her chest. He scrambled off the bed and kneeled before her, a bit panicked to see tears in her eyes. “Lya? Lyanna, what is it? Did Baratheon do something?” he grew angrier at the thought; if that man hurt his sister, he’d teach him some manners!

“I will be miserable, Benny. I know I will. A lady? A wife? That’s not me.”

He leaned back on his heels, signing. “Lya…” he didn’t know what to say. He knew she was unhappy—and seeing her crying hurt—but there was nothing they could do. The betrothal was already done. They had no choice in the matter.

Suddenly, she surged to her feet—startling him so much he fell back on his butt—and wiped her tears away with a harsh hand. Benjen noted her dress starting to fall, and snapped his eyes shut. He sat there, sighing, and heard fabric falling to the floor, followed by a clunk—probably the corset. It sounded entirely too heavy to be clothing. Crazy southerners.

“Enough of this, crying like a ninny!” she muttered. Then he heard the sounds of chests opening, and more fabric rustled. “Like some idiot southern girl.”

“Not the blue one!” he ordered, “I’m wearing that tomorrow, and you always dirty my clothes.”

“Not always! You act like I’m a slob.”

“You are,” he muttered, and then yelped when something hit him in the face. He dragged the fabric off, eyes still closed. “And violent, too.” This time he heard the projectile coming and ducked to avoid it.

“Done!” she said, and he opened his eyes to see her dressed in breeches, high boots, and a green tunic. She was pulling her hair up into a bun, holding a leather hair-tie in her teeth. She secured her hair, and pulled on a grey cloak.

“How do I look?”

Benjen blinked. “Like a girl in boys’ clothes. Wait, when have you cared about how you look?”

Then his eyes widened. “Lyanna! You’re not going to…”

Lya shot him a guilty look, and then made her way to the door. He scrambled up, blocking her path. She scowled, “Move, Benny!”

“Tell me you’re not going to see the prince!” he hissed. “You promised, Lya. He’s old—and-and married. If someone saw you—”

“They won’t! And he’s not that old,” she insisted, making him frown harder. “Besides, we only talk—you know that. He treats me like a person, Benny. He talks to me, doesn’t make fun of me when I say I want to be a knight. I doubt he even notices I have breasts—” Benjen flinched “—especially not when Princess Elia is such a beauty.”

She sounded entirely too disappointed about that fact. Ever since Rhaegar had caught him and Lyanna while they hurried to get rid of her armor, the prince had shown them—her in particular—increasing interest during the nightly feasts. Lyanna acted peculiarly around the prince—his singing had even made her cry during the first feast.

“He’s married,” Benjen repeated, frowning in disapproval.
She rolled her eyes, annoyed. “I know that—I’m not eloping with him, Benny. He’s my friend. And this would be the last time I can see him before we go back home.”

Benjen kept frowning, eyes narrowed. She huffed. “Look, you can come along if you don’t believe me. Rhaegar—I mean prince Rhaegar—is a good person. You liked him too, Benny; remember how long you two talked about that legend about a prince or something? You know I’m right—and you know that I can take care of myself.” She opened the cloak and pulled up the tunic, showing him the dagger she kept strapped to her thigh—a gift from Brandon.

He wavered. He should go along with her…but the Prince was a good man; everyone said so. And he really wanted to finish his book…finally, he sighed, giving in.

“Alright go, but you’d better not get caught! It’ll be my head if father finds out.”

She grinned, and abruptly leaned close to kiss him on the cheek. He flinched away, scowling, “Eww, Lya!”

She laughed, “Love you, baby brother.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered, secretly pleased. “And don’t stay out too late—they’ll notice if you have bags under your eyes tomorrow. And the prince should be well rested if he wants to win the joust.”

She smiled, promising. Then, she cracked open the door to make sure the hall was empty, pulled up the hood, and disappeared.

Benjen’s eyes snapped open, and he surged up with a gasp. “Wait!”

He stumbled to his feet, half asleep, and tried to scramble towards the door, desperate to chase after her and stop his sister; at the very least go with her! That night—that night caused everything! He had to—he had to stop her; he had to save them! If he could stop Rhaegar from crowning her, then everything would change!

He rushed into the hall, desperate, and came to an abrupt halt when he saw the murky waters of the swamps beyond the arched halls. He stared, breathing hard, at the far-away shore. Every moment that passed, the shore got farther away, as the castle drifted upon the crannog. Greywater Watch was perhaps one of the most unique castles in Westeros. Not only was it built upon a man-made floating island—making it impossible for strangers or ravens to find—but housed the unique culture of the crannogmen. Benjen had arrived there yesterday, after a letter from Jon—who was at House Buckwell—asked him to deliver a missive to Lord Howland. He could have sent a curious, but he hadn’t seen Howland in months, and decided to make the trip himself. He’d been growing stir crazy at the castle, plagued by good-memories-turned-nightmares, and tried to escape them.

He’d failed.

“House Reed,” he whispered to himself. “I’m at House Reed. On the Greywater. Lyanna is dead. Father, Brandon…dead. They’re dead, and it’s been eleven years. And they’re dead. I can’t save them, I can’t go back. My name is Benjen Stark, and I’m at House Reed. Howland’s Keep. Lyanna’s friend. They’re dead, but Jon’s not. Lya’s son. I-I have to take care of Jon, I have to—”

“Benjen,” a quiet voice murmured. He flinched, turning to see Howland Reed beside him, having appeared silently as he was wont to do. He’d no doubt seen and heard everything. The smaller man put a carefully hand upon Benjen’s shoulder, eyes understanding.
“Howland,” Ben whispered, swallowing with difficulty. He slowly became aware of his state of undress—he was standing there in his small clothes, like a fool, muttering to himself as he stared at nothing.

Benjen flushed in shame, looking away. It wasn’t often that others saw just how fractured he was inside. He usually hid it better, behind a cheerful façade—and having something to do helped. But even he couldn’t control his dreams. “I apologize, my lord. I-I’ll get dressed.”

He escaped back into his room before Howland could reply, shutting the door. He dragged his clothes on, shame hanging heavy, trying desperately to banish the dream: a good memory that was polluted by his knowledge of its aftermath.

He had so many regrets, sometimes he thought they’d bury him.

Benjen needed to keep busy, he needed to move and think and exhaust himself. It was partly why he’d encouraged Ned to accept Lord Stannis’s alliance. While he did believe that the changes would be good for the North, the selfish reason is that he wanted some to do. Jon’s castle wouldn’t be in construction forever, and when he and his wife moved in, Benjen would be useless. But with the North changing, adapting…he could travel, oversee more castles, meet more people. Make their kingdom strong.

That way, he could atone.

Benjen stepped towards the basin of water, staring at his reflection in the polished metal mirror. He dunked his head in it, wishing the water was colder. He held his breath until his lungs burned, and then raised his head with a gasp. The man who stared back at him was dripping, water running in rivulets from his long black hair and shaggy beard. The image was a lie; he was no man, just a little boy whose negligence had killed his family.

Benjen took a calming breath and forced a smile onto his face, staring at his reflection until the façade looked natural.

He stepped back into the hall. Howland was waiting for him, a hand against the arches as he stared out into the swamp. “Her death touched us all, Benjen. It still resonates throughout the realm, shaping the fate of millions.”

Ben swallowed; he couldn’t talk about Lyanna. Not even with this man, who swore himself to her. Howland’s loyalty to his sister, and by extension, to her son, was absolute. The crannogmen’s culture believed in soul-bonds, formed from completely selfless acts. When Lyanna has saved Howland from a bunch of bullying squires at Harrenhal, and then entered the jousts in his honor—an open secret at the Greywater—she’d formed that bond. As far as the crannogmen were concerned, Lyanna Stark was bound forevermore to their Lord, and that was a pledge they took seriously. Howland had never been able to repay that debt to her personally, so he focused his efforts on Jon. The young boy would likely never know how much power he had in the Neck—not if Ned had anything to say about it.

_He should know you, Lya. Your son should know!_

“He should know you, Lya. Your son should know!” Benjen asked, pushing the resentment away.

“He’d been surprised to receive the request from Jon. While his nephew sometimes sent him brief updates on his journey—Oberyn Martell, that flighty arsehole—and he sent back updates on the castle, Jon had never sounded as serious as in the last letter. Benjen wonder if it had to do with what happened to Daenerys Targaryen.
Humiliating a child. You were right about him, Lya; he is a swine.

“Aye. And call me Howland, Benjen; we have little and less use for formality here. Come.”

Howland clasped his hands behind his back, and Benjen followed his slight green form all the way until they reached the massive god’s wood at the center of the keep. Howland was calm, but when they entered the wood, it was like stepping into a different space.

Benjen shivered. Something about this place raised the hairs on the back of his neck. It was like they were being watched, judged, accepted, and rejected all at once. He shivered.

Howland watched him, noting the discomfort. “The blood of the Marsh Kings still flows strongly in the Wolves. Such powerful lineage; Jon’s more so. So far, he leans towards us in power, and the dragons in temper.”

Benjen shivered again; the tone was eerier, almost like Jon were standing before them, but only Howland could see him.

“Is he safe?” Benjen asked, a mere whisper. He didn’t know why he believed Howland would know the answer.

Howland didn’t respond, and they walked through the woods until they reached a massive Weirwood, it’s canopy so large and thick that under it the sun could barely penetrate, it’s trunk so massive it could be used to build a whole warship. This tree must be older than Winterfell itself; perhaps older than the First Men. Benjen’s heart began to beat, awed to be in its presence, and the eyes carved into the tree began to leak blood-colored sap over a pained visage. Howland walked to the tree, placed his hand gently upon it, and close his eyes.

The man that answered was Howland, yet not.

“He is an infant surrounded by greed. Turmoil is in his future; he’s starting to move the board. He and the other. Their destiny is violence, Benjen Stark; in this world or any other; in this path or any other. Safe is a dream, a mirage in the desert. Power is the answer you seek.”

Benjen took a shuddering breath, shaken. He licked his dry lips.

Howland took a harsh breath, and yanked his hand away from the bark. He wavered on his feet, and Benjen surged forward to catch him as he stumbled. “That answer had a fair price,” the Lord of the Greywater murmured.

“I’m sorry,” Benjen responded, guilty. Howland chuckled slightly and stood.

Then he turned his head and beckoned someone forward. A small, slim girl stepped forward. She seemed to be Jon’s age. Her long brown hair and deep green eyes blended her into the forest, as did her brown breeches, green tunic, and golden vest. On her back, she had a three-pronged trident. A new was hooked to her belt, alongside a serious of knives.

“My daughter, Meera,” Howland introduced.

“My lady,” Benjen bowed. Her somber, frowning face didn’t change.

She nodded at him, “My lord.”

Meera reached into her bag and pulled out a fistful of green, and held it out for him to see. He blinked at the presentation, and then shot Howland a curious look. “Moss?”
“Aye. The north is changing, Benjen, and we will change with it. To a degree. This here is one of our greatest secrets, and the answer to your nephew’s inquiry.”

Howland took out the missive, and handed it to Benjen.

To the honorable Lord Howland of House Reed, Lord of Greywater Watch,

My lord, I write you this letter with a request, one that you may find to be both arrogant and unacceptable. I apologize in advance for any insult, but I have something I must protect, and I need power to do so. I know what such a desire says about me, I know the plague of my birth, and I know I have no right to ask this of you, but I must do so.

When we first met, you offered to foster me, to raise me as an equal amongst your children. Your words to me are not forgotten, and I will be grateful to you and yours for as long as I live. Our Houses, which border one another, will only see peace as long as my line exists. This oath I swear to you, in perpetuity, or the gods strike down me and mine.

The crannogmen know the secrets of the swamps better than any other, and I ask you to share your knowledge with me. I do not ask this lightly, my lord, and I will take neither offense nor insult should you reject my request. The tie between Houses will be strong and peaceful, no matter your answer. Your people have lived isolated, your mannerisms secret, and your way of life for millennia. I do not seek to disrupt this order. No one of my blood will ever disrespect the culture of your people.

I would ask of you, my lord, to share with me what resources exist in the swamp that is desirable to the world? What resources could make us the gold we need to protect ourselves from those who would harm the weak? What can help us grown strong enough to ensure a peaceful future? I will not ask for an answer over raven; I know this information is precious. But if you decide to aid me, my uncle Benjen is a man of honor, who will protect this knowledge to his grave.

I thank you, my lord, for reading his letter.

With utmost respect,

Jon Snow, Son of Lord Eddard of House Stark, and Heir to Moat Cailin.

Benjen’s eyes were wide, stunned. He remembered his withdrawn, almost shy nephew. But the words written here were not him; the respect, the care was there. But there was a spine of steel underneath. A resolve that Benjen hadn’t seen in Jon before. This child would not look at the ground if faced with Lord Stannis; this child would boldly meet the large man’s gaze.

Fucking Oberyn Martell...perhaps you were good for him after all.

He looked back down to the moss, which the girl still held patiently. “We harvest this moss every year, dry it, and store it for the winters. The process is easy and quick. The following year, it grows back even more plentiful. Then, come winter, we burn this in place of wood. It is harmless to the lungs, burns hotter and longer, is easier to collect, and is much lighter to ship in large qualities. One-tenth of my land—and as you know, that doesn’t include the lands surrounding the moat—is more than enough to keep all of my people warm all winter. Tell me, Benjen,” Howland smiled, and there was a teasing quality to it, “How much do you think the southern kingdoms—particularly the Vale and the Reach, who are bereft of trees—would pay for such a resource? A fuel source which will never run out?”

Benjen’s breath left him, awed. His mind began to race with the implications. He reached out towards the moss, and Meera handed it over easily. It was the size of his palm, but extremely light.
“How long—?”

“How long will that amount burn when dried,” she murmured.

Benjen looked at Howland, astonished. “Gods, Howland; the gold this could make, why would you not...?”

Benjen hesitated, and looked around awkwardly. The people of the Greywater were, by the standards of most, very poor. They dressed in rough animal skins, lived in huts or amongst the trees, and were so slim they looked starved. Many considered them akin to wildlings, viewed badly even by some Northmen.

Howland chuckled, amused. “The blood of the First Men flows in you, Stark, but our blood is older still. We need only the trees to live, they are our home and sustenance.”

Benjen believed him; there was something in this forest that spoke of mystical, powerful things. The crannogmen’s may be human, but Benjen was beginning to suspect that they were a different breed than he was.

*The people of the Greywater are descended from the Children of the Forest,* whispered Old Nan’s voice. *They have no interest in the world outside their trees.*

“If this moss becomes known, it’s likely that many will try to come here and steal it,” he warned his friend; Lyanna’s friend. “Jon would not ask that of you; your way of life could be at risk.”

Howland smiled peacefully. “Let them try; the trees have eyes and ears in the Neck. The world may call my people savages, but ten thousand years of history prove that words are wind.”

“Howland, this is...” Benjen trailed off, struggling for words. This was such an immense gift; how could he even begin to show his appreciation?

Howland reached up and placed a hand on Benjen’s shoulders, squeezing. “House Reed owes your blood a soul debt, my friend; let this be our repayment in honor of the lost. Jon will need every advantage he can, if he wishes to join the games—both of men and of Others.”

*****

Ned sat in the Great Hall, facing the gathering of lords. Beside him on his right sat Robb, and his left sat Catelyn. They were flanked, respectively, but Maester Luwin and Jory Cassel. The lords were arguing loudly over Stannis’s proposal, and most of the talk was negative. He hadn’t expected anything less of them. The mountain clans—those who dwelt in the Northern Mountains, were particularly vehement in their protests.

“My Lord,” Lord Harclay protested. “I beg your pardon, but our mountains are a symbol of the north, not a resource for the south! Lord Baratheon insults us, saying that we need to alter our way of life just to line his pockets!”

Murmurs of agreement, particularly from some of the other clans.

Lord Hugo Wull, the head of the most powerful clan, surged to his feet. “I say it’s about time, my lord! If our mountains can do something to stop those gods forsaken Iron Born from raiding my lands and slaughtering my people, then I for one will stand with you!” The Wulls had a powerful animosity against the Iron Born, who regularly raided the Bay of Ice that bordered their lands. They’d participate for vengeance, if nothing else.
A few men murmured in agreement from the westernmost houses.

“Are you mad, Wull? How do you propose to even get into the mountains? They’re cold as a whore’s kiss even in the summer; mining is a death trap!” Lord Knott scorned. “We won’t be saving anyone if all our men die up there!”

“Watch your tongue in the presence of my wife, my Lord,” Eddard warned. The man bowed quickly in apology.

“Spare me your theatrics, Knott,” Wull boomed. “My family has lived there for millennia, as has yours! You expect me to believe your people don’t know those mountains? Bah!”

“It’s because I know them that I say it’s foolhardy!” Knott slammed his fist onto the table, beard quivering in anger.

Maege Mormont stood, towering over many men and still fearsome despite her age. The She-Bear’s voice was gravelly. “The Iron Born pillage Bear Island so often, we’ve been forced deep into the woods. They’ve made cowards of us. No more, I say! We may not have mountains, but we have fur and plenty of it. And our glasshouses are the best in all the North. You old fools, comfortable in your safe south-eastern holdings are summer children if I ever saw them. Bear Island supports the Starks!”

“Hear, hear!” someone shouted.

“Ambition is the southern way! We don’t need their fancy trappings!”

“Shut up you old fool, protection isn’t fancy trappings! Come to my keep and face the wildlings yourself, for once!”

“House Manderly supports the Starks! Trade and commerce will make us all rich!”

“Spoken like a true southern descendent, Manderly,” a lord muttered. “Is that new armor? Outgrew the old ones already?”

“How dare you, Cerwyn!”

“We’ve survived alone for millennia, longer than those pampered children to the south! We can survive many more without them!”

“It would be great if we could live, for one, without having to constantly worry about survival.”

“Gods know the current king is unlikely to aid us in that.”

“I, as much as any other Northman, understand the anger towards the Targaryens, but a child? A future daughter of the north? The outrage!”

“That’s your king and your Lord’s friend you’re speaking of, Umber! Hold your tongue!”

“We don’t need the crown or the south or any of them! We can get strong by ourselves!”

“Oh, you can survive the winters without food from Highgarden, Karstark? How about you share your secret with the rest of us?”

“Exactly! If we had more glass houses, we could survive the winters! We could be independent! But we need coin to purchase the glass from Dorne!”

“Filthy foreigners.”
“More castles would mean more protection for the small folk, more glass houses would mean fewer
die of hunger, and spring would bring more children. It’s a logical choice!”

“It’s an affront to the gods, I say! If you can’t survive the winters as we have done for millennia, then
you don’t deserve to!”

“Spoken like a man whose never been to the far north, Flint!”

The bickering continued like that for hours, and Ned’s head began to throb painfully. Eventually,
they all retired to their rooms after a hearty meal, but the next day and the next day and the next were
much the same. Luckily, the sentiment for change was slowly gaining traction, as more and more
benefits were identified. The only problem is, they couldn’t agree on anything concrete.

It lasted for six straight days before Ned’s patience cracked.

“That is enough! Silence! Be silent, I say! The North is stagnant! You all know it, even if you deny
the truth. We have no fleet, a small population, and we are culled every day by our enemies. We
must change! I have been patient, but remember that I am your Lord, and my word is law. Any
who would dispute this fact, step forward.”

Silence, the men blinking to see calm Ned Stark driven to such anger. No one moved.

“I stand with House Stark, my lords,” a voice cut through the quiet, and Ned looked up to see Roose
Bolton standing. He recalled Jon’s letter about Domeric, and eyed the lord warily. He’d remained
much too quiet the past few days. “The north must change; for our people. But, my lord Stark, we
need not tie ourselves so heavily to the south, especially when the Northern mountains are so
dangerous to mine. An alliance with Stannis Baratheon is unnecessary. We have more than enough
resources to grow powerful without being dependent upon the south.”

Murmurs of agreement sounded. Ned curled his hand into a fist.

“Stannis Baratheon is a good man, my lords, and honorable man,” Ned insisted. “He works towards
the betterment of the realm. We would not be dependent, we would be partners.”

“He works for the king,” Lord Dustin announced. “Who slighted us not once, but twice! Lord
Stannis may be raising the Targaryen girl, but he also allowed such a thing to happen to her while
under his watch. This is the man we would trust with our mountains?”

Murmurs of agreement sounded, and many came forward with their own views of Stannis. Manderly
was particularly vocal about his dislike. Ned cursed Stannis’s cold nature; it won him few friends.

“Forgive me, my lord Stark,” Bolton said. “But it seems to me that Lord Stannis needs this
partnership much more than we do. Yet it would be our men dying in the mines. Our men that have
to transport the materials across the continent; we are not in Valyria, we have no dragon roads to ease
the path. Unless you propose to allow southerners into our lands to reek havoc?”

Angry clamour sounded amongst the people, hating the idea to their cores. That, at least, they all
agreed upon.

“What do you propose then, Lord Bolton?” Ned bit out. He felt the alliance slipping from his fingers.
But he, reluctantly, admitted that Roose had a point. They didn’t need Stannis, that desire came from
Ned’s own friendship with the man. Would this rejection compromise the good relationship they
had?

“We must send our men into the Wolf’s Wood, every one of us. We must build our fleet, hundreds
strong! Warships to guard against the iron islanders, and fishing ships for the Bay of Seals. We must focus on whaleling and fishing to gain coin, as well as fur. Also, I have been in contact with an acquaintance in Braavos, and they are more than open to purchasing wood from us; Braavos is also much closer than Dragonstone. If it pleases my Lord, we need not focus on mining at all; we have more than enough ability to grow if only we build up our fleet. This way, we won’t needlessly lose men in the mines, and neither are we dependent on the south or the whims of the crown. Furthermore, the old gods would be appeased; after all, there is a precedent for a fleet, but disturbing the Northern Mountains just to trade with the south? That would be a very new endeavor. I offer only my humble opinion, of course my lord, in support of your desire for change.”

With a final cool look around at the impressed lords, and a faintly superior look at Ned, Roose sat. Almost as one, the lords turned to him. He clenched his hand into a fist under the table, reminded of that long-ago meeting when he’d told them all of the betrothal. Again, Roose undermined him. The man made it seem as if Ned’s desire was personal, while Roose himself was only being a dutiful bannerman by providing a plan that satisfied everyone. Ned really shouldn’t hate the man as much as he did, but Bolton grated on his nerves.

“Would you all be amenable to this plan, my Lords and Ladies?” Ned reluctantly asked.

After a brief discussion between them, the vast majority vocalized their support for the plan, many even starting to seem enthused by the idea. Ned didn’t miss the way many lords regarded Bolton with respect, perhaps even admiration. His gut churned.

“Very well. No alliance with the south. Return home at once and gather your men; we have a fleet to build.”

And he had a letter to write.

*****

Dear Jon,

I’m beginning to be impatient to meet you; now even our letters are a risk. When you arrive in Dorne, I will ask my cousin to allow me to travel to you. Surely Prince Doran will agree to house me. I will be the perfect guest.

I hope that Lord Reed agrees with whatever you asked of him. And that it’s something that won’t cost us much, although everything seems to. I doubt you could have insulted him, Jon; you are the politest person I have ever almost-met. He will see that you are earnest.

There is news from the capital; the Master of Laws has perished, and the King appointed his younger brother, Lord Renly, to the position. Cousin Stannis visited, as he does every two weeks, and told us. I think he is unhappy about it; he was never close to his brothers. If Lord Renly resembles the king in temperament, I can understand why. I hope they can get along, because I hate to see my cousin so unhappy.

I have lived in castles all my life, and interacted with very few smallfolk. I feel a bit ashamed now, that I’ve never given them or their troubles much thought. I have an idea, but it may be too ridiculous to work. Don’t laugh at me, Jon Snow. If Lord Howland agrees to help you and you find something of value, perhaps it would allow us to start building our own people. The north is small in population, and I know cousin Stannis has always been worried about finding enough people for our castle. Perhaps you can tell the smallfolk you meet that we would be open to having them. I will do the same thing when I return to King’s Landing; if taxes are rising outside of city, then maybe there are people inside who are also looking for another place to go. Do you think Lord Stark would be
unhappy to have so many non-northern people in his lands? He was kind to me, and I don’t want to risk his anger.

I hope House Rykker is more hospitable. Be careful on the roads, Jon. Tell Prince Oberyn that I will kick him if anything happens to you.

Yours,

Dany

P.S: Can you truly sing, Jon? I would love to hear it.

*****

“You’ve sure changed your tune,” Domeric noted, bemused. They sat in House Rykker’s music room, Domeric seated at the high harp. “At Buckwell, you’d glare at me every time I asked you to accompany. Are you normally this erratic, or has the prince finally succeeded in driving you mad?”

Oberyn, who was flirting with a maid on the other side of the room, shot them an intrigued look.

“Shut up and play,” Jon muttered.

Chapter End Notes

A few notes:

Shoutout to the amazing Madrigal_in_training, who told me about peat moss and its use as fuel! I've been waiting for this reveal since chapter 8!

The whole high taxes things is just my idea. I assumed that with the crown in such debt, they'd raised taxes in order to mitigate it.

Also, people ask me where I get the idea that the North is anti-change. That is also my own idea, to explain why there has been so little development. I can't understand why they wouldn't have a fleet, when the iron islanders are such a hugely emphasized threat to them.

I'll get to the comments from the last chapter soon! Sorry for the wait, but this chapter just all came at once! :D
“Damn you, Varys!” Robert roared, slamming his fist against his desk. Jon Arryn didn’t flinch; he’d grown entirely too weary of Robert’s tantrums. At his side, Stannis also didn’t react, staring at Robert with something much too close to scorn for Arryn’s peace of mind.

“It grieves me to have failed you, your grace,” Lord Varys bowed deeply, his long purples sleeves brushing the ground. “As Master of Whispers, I know it is unacceptable.”

The four men stood together in Robert’s personal study. Stannis and Arryn had arrived to talk to the king and put their plan into action, and been met with an enraged man yelling at the Spider. Varys’s face was the picture of contrition, and Arryn didn’t believe it for a second.

“You’re gods damned right it is!” Robert boomed. “Find whoever is spreading these rumours! Find them, Varys! If I hear one more outlandish tale about laughing about what happened to the dragonspawn, about toasting it, about throwing a gods dammed feast in her honor, it’ll be your head! They’re ruining me before all the realms with these stories! Ruining me! And my Master of Whispers can’t find who’s doing it!”

Varys bowed again, making promised and offering his apologies. Then the Spider quickly left, but not before meeting Arryn’s eyes with a secret gaze. Arryn pushed down the guilt. It had to be done; it was his only chance to finally take down the queen. Then he could start moulding the crown prince into a real king, and not the spoil, selfish boy coddled by Cersei. There was nothing Jon Arryn regretted more than orchestrating a marriage to House Lannister. It had done nothing but make them all miserable.

Surely if Robert had a proper queen, he'd start behaving like a proper king.

Robert collapsed back into his seat, the chair groaning under his accumulating weight. The king pushed his hand though his hair, his face red from anger. He grabbed a full glass of ale and drowned the whole thing in a couple of swallows.

“What do you want, Jon? I’m not in the mood for more bureaucratic horseshit. You handle it.”

Arryn pushed down the well of anger. Pushing it down—it was getting more difficult—he beseeched his king.

“Robert, about what we discussed the last time—”

The king gave a humourless laugh. “You’re still on about that fool plan?”

“Your court has all but abandoned you, Robert,” Stannis said, brutally. “These rumours have humiliated you before the realm, making many doubt your rule. You have to act.”

Robert shot Stannis a vile glare. “I won’t be dictated to by my Master of Ships! Don’t forget who gave you that position, brother. This is all your fault for not keeping a better eye on the damned girl!”

“Your grace—Robert—Lord Stannis is right. You cannot rule without your people, and you’re rapidly losing their support. Allowing your queen to humiliate a highborn girl is—"
“She’s a Targaryen!” Robert exploded. “A spawn!”

“She’s a little girl, who was under the crown’s care,” Stannis snapped, taking a step closer, teeth gritted. “Cersei Lannister’s continued presence in his castle has driven many of the other Houses away. There are whispers that she’s a Mad Queen, and they’re only growing worse at her continued erratic behaviour. The King pushing it all off onto his Hand is only making things worse. At this rate, someone may get the idea to challenge your reign. Your rule is too new to weather this, Robert!”

“Let the traitors try!” the king shouted, enraged. “I’ll see their bloody carcases on the battlefield!”

Arryn could see the situation was spiralling out of control. Robert was just too stubborn, and Stannis’s blunt nature only made it worse. Arryn decided it was time to play his final card. If the king once again refused…then he honestly didn’t know where to go from there. Arryn took out a letter from his coat pocket, and handed it to his King. “A missive from Lord Stark, Your Grace.”

Robert froze, staring at the letter in shock. Ned hadn’t communicated with Robert in ten years, not since he’d impulsively ordered the betrothal between Daenerys and Jon Snow. Ned hadn’t even stopped by after the ore meeting, despite being so very close by. It had hurt Robert, even more than Ned publicly forgiving House Targaryen had enraged him. If there was one man that could sway the stubborn King, it was Ned Stark. The other man had even compromised his own values and agreed to patch things up with Robert in exchange.

The king took the letter, and the room was dead silent for many minutes as he read. Arryn watched as Robert gradually slumped forward, suddenly exhausted. “His first letter in ten years, and it’s to beg justice for a dragon.”

“No,” Arryn said, gently. “It’s to beg justice for a child; something Ned Stark would do for anyone. It’s a chance to show him, to show the realm, the kind of man you really are, Robert. The good-hearted boy I raised.”

The king looked up, defeated. “I hate that bitch more than any of you, but what can I do? She’s Tywin Lannister’s daughter. He has too much damned power over us, much as I hate to say it. You should know that better than anyone, Jon.”

“Lord Tywin has already agreed,” Stannis said coolly.

Robert’s jaw sagged in shock.

*****

Dear Dany,

I’m also growing impatient. Now, knowing we can finally meet in Dorne, I’m in even more of a hurry to get there. But the prince is much too comfortable taking his time. As you know, a month passes between each House we stay at, and who knows how many more stops the prince has in mind. I’ve tried to ask him, but he waves it away. I did look at a map of all the Houses in Westeros, and I just hope he doesn’t plan to grace all of them with his presence; it would take us years, Dany. Which is why I was more than happy to tell the prince of your threat to kick him. His reply was a grin and the words that you’d “have to catch him first.” He did tell me that our next destination is House Rosby.

Regarding Lord Reed, my uncle Benjen sent me a letter about a possible resource in the swamps. He is planning to sail to King’s Landing and will meet us there in a couple of months. Lord Reed is more than willing to help us, which I admit surprised me. The crannogmen are notoriously isolated
from the world, so I didn’t think they’d be willing. But my uncle says that father is starting to take steps to change the North, to build ships and castles and glass houses and roads. Perhaps Lord Reed decided to aid us in support of father’s plan; the Reeds are one of House Stark’s most loyal bannermen.

Your idea about the smallfolk is brilliant. I’ll have to write father about his opinion, but I don’t think he’d be adverse to it; he too was worried about where to find people to populate our lands. My father is a good man, Dany; he isn’t low enough to punish children for the evil of relatives. If this resource of House Reeds is valuable, we would need many people to help us gather it. I’ll wait until I speak with my uncle before trying to persuade the people I meet to head north. The weather is not favourable there, even if the swamps keep the territory warmer than what is found farther north.

Staying at House Rykker has been a strange experience. As you know, they’re the Lords of Duskendale. Despite how the everyone in the old Lords, House Darklyn, were executed after the Defiance of Duskendale, many of the servants here have been present for generations. I’ve been asking them constantly to share their knowledge, and finally, they did so. They’ve told me hushed stories about when your father, King Areys, came here in 277 to meet with Lord Darklyn and convince the man to stop demanding a charter—similar to the one Dorne has—and start paying taxes. As you know, King Areys was taken captive, and, on threat of his death, no one could attack Duskendale.

When he arrived, his entourage was killed, and he beaten, stripped naked before the House, and taken to the dungeon. One woman, who was in charge of bringing the king a meal every other day, told me she would often hear him scream as the guards and servants tortured him during his six months of captivity. Another servant said the king would cry well into the night, begging for freedom, and the guards would laugh and mock him. It was only when Ser Barristan Selmy snuck into the castle that he was saved. Ser Barristan the Bold is famed even in the North for his honor and courage. Everyone says he is a great man, and singlehandedly rescuing your father proved it.

I don’t mean to hurt you, Dany, when I tell you all this. I hope it will bring you comfort if you knew that your father’s madness wasn’t predestined. No man could have survived the torment he did without losing a part of himself. I don’t absolve his actions, but now I understand him a bit better.

I don’t think Targaryens are destined for madness.

Yours,

Jon.

P.S: Yes, I can sing. Domeric says I’m really good at it.

*****

Myra Baratheon sat upon a tall, flat rock overlooking the beaches of Dragonstone. There were stairs leading up to her spot, and a thick blue blanket underneath kept her comfortable. She drew her green shall closer against the wind, cradling the sleeping Ryelle closer to her breast. Myra watched Daenerys speed across the beach upon her white horse, laughing alongside Steffon, who was chasing after her on a much smaller horse. Myra watched Daenerys speed across the beach upon her white horse, laughing alongside Steffon, who was chasing after her on a much smaller horse. The princess’s unbound curls steamed joyfully behind her, shimmering brilliantly in the sun. Daenerys’s hair had grown so long that it nearly reached her upper thighs, but Myra couldn’t bring herself to have it trimmed. The length reminded her of her beloved queen, who preferred to keep her hair in long, intricate styles.

Although for queen Rhaella, Myra grimaced, that choice also had much to do with concealing the bruises circling her neck.
A noise to her left drew her attention, and she watched as Stannis approached and climbed up the steps to her left. Her husband looked weary as he took a seat beside her, relaxing back as much as he ever did. His severe face watched the children play, looking for all the world as if he disapproved, but only one who knew him would see the warmth in his gaze.

“Eddard refused the alliance. His people decided that building the fleet and investing in fishing and whaling was the safest course of action.” His tone was cool, matter-of-fact, but Myra could hear the undertone of disappointment. She watched his face carefully, and saw the tell-tale movement of his jaw that showed him grinding his teeth together.

“The Northmen would refuse an opportunity for richness?” she asked, unable to keep out her scorn. “Fools.”

Stannis signed. He leaned forward, clasped his hands together, and place his elbows upon his knees. “They’re much too stubborn to outright seek gold; it reminds them too much of the south’s greed.”

Myra grimaced; she would never understand the scorn those barbarians had for the south’s way of life.

“What will you do?”

Stannis stared out at the children, watching the revelry with a sombre eye. Daenerys hadn’t been quite the same for a few weeks after the incident, and they’d all been worried. She’d withdrawn more into herself. A few days after they’d come to Dragonstone, she’d torn down all her dresses from the closest and cried amongst the wreckage.

“These are all a lie Myra! A lie!”

Ever since, the princess had only been comfortable in tougher materials with a pair of stiff leggings underneath the skirt. Materials that would be hard to rip. She’d also been more distrusting, anticipating treachery when once she’d anticipate good outcomes. Myra had been worried it would last, but, slowly, the behaviour passed. Although the new clothing preferences remained.

Those had been Tyene’s idea. *“She no longer feels safe, my Lady. We need to foster the illusion of security, and clothes are a powerful tool in many ways.”*

Myra curled her hands into fists, her nails digging in painfully. She couldn’t stop the feeling weighted guilt in her stomach, which threatened to engulp her. Myra had been the one to convince Stannis that they would all go to King’s Landing, all those years ago, knowing perfectly well that Daenerys would face some harsh challenges. Myra wanted the girl to grow strong, to face the evil of the world, but—shamefully—the Lady of Dragonstone had also used the opportunity to further her own goals.

*Pycelle and whoever holds his leash.* But she was no closer to uncovering that than she’d ever been. The Grand Maester was too powerful to openly challenge, and she could think of no way of catching his owners, besides witnessing a direct command.

Myra had just never imaged the level of insanity that Cersei Lannister was capable of. Nor how truly stupid the other woman was. The false queen had orchestrated her own fall.

“I’ll try again,” Stannis finally responded, nodding to himself. Myra blinked, momentarily confused, before remembering her question. “Perhaps individual Lords would be open to an alliance. I’ll write to Eddard about it.” Stannis paused, hesitant. “I’m…also planning to send him my evaluation of the Iron Islands and the best methods of navel defence.” He cleared his throat, awkwardly. “As Master
of Ships, I have a lot more experience in this area than Eddard could have.”

Myra blinked at that, brows raised. “That’s very generous of you, Stannis.” Especially after Lord Stark’s refusal.

Her husband shifted a bit, and she dropped the subject after noting how it made him uncomfortable. She turned back to the children, fighting a smile. If only others could see what a good man Stannis was, if only they’d take the time to look underneath his harsh exterior.

Well, then they’d probably desire him more, and Myra was content being one of the only people that knew her husband’s heart. She was not ashamed of admitting that she felt possessive of him. She looked down at Ryelle, the proof of their love. In a couple more years, she would stop drinking the moon tea and give her husband another child. She loved her children, but she had no desire to constantly be nursing.

“If they still refuse,” she began, carefully, “then this plan will bankrupt us.”

Stannis’s face grew grim. “Do you propose we stop, then?”

Myra reached out and clasped his hand, holding it tightly. “I’ve wanted that woman to pay for many, many years. I’m simply stating a fact, my lord husband.”

He nodded, looking away. “I’ve no need for riches, wife. We’ll have enough to function as we would have before all this. The armour is growing in popularity, particularly in Essos where the heat and fighting styles beg for lighter cover. Steel is, of course, stronger, but it’s also heavier—not to mention iron. Another smith will no doubt uncover the secret soon, so I’ve ordered Cressen to look into other possible sources. If the North keeps refusing, we’ll have to see if another landowner is more open to an alliance with us.”

“Cressen mentioned that so far, he’s only identified the Valyrian peninsula as having similar geography,” she pointed out. Stannis didn’t look surprised that she was aware of Cressen’s research. Myra made it a point to be very, very mindful of what occurred in her House. There were spies, she had no doubt, but she tried her best to ensure they had no opportunity to learn anything. It was why she kept Daenerys and her children generally isolated.

It made Daenerys recent interest in going to the village and interacting with the smallfolk problematic.

“Yes, and no one is fool enough to venture there. Regardless, the people of Essos would know their own land much better than any book. It would be auspicious if could we maintain this monopoly for a few years more.”

“Tobho Mott has an interesting proposition,” Myra began. She, too, had been thinking about the monopoly, and spoken with the smith at length. “Mott says that only specially trained smiths would have the ability to uncover the secrets, and they are few and far between. Rather than wait for them to uncover it for their own masters, we could invite them to train with Mott here. Monopolize the smiths, if we cannot monopolize the ore.”

Stannis didn’t make any outward sign of surprise, but she could sense his attention. Finally, he shook his head. “No, it’s too risky. They may very well take the skills and leave. It would make a possibility into a guarantee.”

Myra looked away, but nodded. “I thought the same, but Mott said that eventually, more hands will be needed. The orders are increasing every day, and he is just one man.”
Stannis started out at the children. They’d dismounted, and were now seated in the sand trying to build a castle. He let out a sigh. “I’ll speak with him before I depart.”

She nodded. They remained quiet for a while, until Ryelle woke up and began to fuss. Myra motioned down to Tyene, who stood beside Ser Justin and Ser Redmond, keeping watch over the children. Tyene and Redmond were distracted by her signal, but Ser Justin didn’t take eyes away for a second. He’d told them everything that had happened during the incident, particularly how Daenerys had saved his life when she’d ordered him to stand down. The young knight of House Massey had all but sworn his sword to Daenerys now. Myra was pleased by the development; it was about time her charge began to accumulate men and women who were loyal to her before all others.

Myra’s eyes drifted to Tyene as the little sand snake came to take Ryelle down to play with the others. Myra was still unsure about allowing her to stay amongst them, considering her allegiance to Dorne, but it was too good an opportunity to pass up. Myra knew just how much Doran and Oberyn Martell had adored their sister and her children. There was no way they would have simply forgiven Princess Elia’s gruesome murder. If their plans could get Myra what she wanted—revenge against whomever had poisoned queen Rhaella and inadvertently driven the Targaryen royals into such a state—then she’d be more than willing to help them.

Unfortunately, Tyene was either lying when she said she didn’t know the plan, or—more likely—Doran kept the information close to his breast in paranoia. She couldn’t fault him that, when whatever he planned was likely treasonous. Although she didn’t believe treason was even possible against a usurper.

Viserys in Essos was the true king. And if he should fall…her eyes lingered upon Daenerys.

“How did Lord Tywin take it?” she asked. She remembered the old Hand of the King. She also knew the rumours. Tywin Lannister was no one to cross, and they were doing just that.

“As well as could be expected. It doesn’t matter, he has no choice. Cersei Lannister backed him into a corner as much as we did.”

“A cornered Lion is a dangerous thing,” she murmured. She didn’t doubt that he would be planning their downfall, but it was worth it. if Tywin was finally starting to play, then they’d just have to be better. Myra knew how dangerous her plans were. She was neither a fool nor a coward.

“Yes,” Stannis looked into her eyes, and flip his hand to interlace their fingers. “But so is a vengeful Stag.”

*****

Dear Jon,

I know why you told me about what happened to my father in Duskendale, Jon. Thank you.

After your letter, I’ve been asking Myra to tell me stories of my father. She was resistant at first; she truly hates him, Jon. That, more than anything else, tells me that he deserves no absolution. Still, I am persistent, because I wanted to know more about this man that hangs over me like a shadow. Eventually, she did admit that the Defiance of Duskendale changed him. He became someone unrecognizable to the court. Myra was only eight at the time, but she remembers how he seemed like ‘a different person’. She said that he was not always so cruel; although he was often a selfish man, he was a decent king. I don’t know if the fact that he was not born terrible is a comfort; does this mean I could become him, or just that anyone can?
Myra says that my parents were never happy together; they were forcefully wed due to some prophesy a witch told my grandfather. However, while there were not close, my father wasn’t cruel to my mother originally. It was only after the years passed that he grew violent. You see, my parents tried for children very often, but only my brothers and I survived. Did you know that I would have had ten siblings had they all lived? Ten, Jon! A whole family. Myra tells me that my brother Rhaegar was born healthy, but my mother’s health failed her soon after. Viserys was sick for many years after his birth, while I was an easy pregnancy, like my eldest brother. My mother was just too weak by the end: she got sick and there was no Maester. So you see, the more children they lost, the worse my father became, until Duskendale finally broke him.

Myra grew so angry, Jon. I think she ended up telling me much more than she intended. There is so much about my family that I didn’t know. I thought about not telling you all this, that someone may read it, but what does it matter? They’ll learn nothing but a sad story that is decades old.

I’ve written to Uncle Aemon about this as well. My brother Rhaegar was also obsessed with some prophesy, although Myra doesn’t know the details. Perhaps it’s the same one that the witch told my grandfather about, and my uncle may know more. It seems very silly to me, to change your life based on some words. It’s like acting in ways that are supposed to please the gods, and like cousin Stannis, I have little patience for that.

I will tell you a secret Jon, but you may think less of me. You see, I very much dislike Ser Barristan Selmy. I have tried not to, but the more time I spent in court around the royal family, the more I began to dislike him. When he tries to be kind to me, it only makes it worse. I know I’m being unfair to him; after all, I forgave Ser Jaime for killing my father (but only after I learned why). I even liked Jaime, before all this. But everyone tells me that Ser Barristan loved my brother well, that he was so loyal to Rhaegar. And yet, he kneeled before his killer and swore his loyalty to him. I don’t understand war, Jon. I don’t want to.

Ser Barristan was knighted by my great-grandfather, King Aegon V. He served as a kingsguard for my family for decades. He fought for House Targaryen in the last Blakefyre rebellion, and killed Maelys I, the last Blackfyre. He even singlehandedly saved my father at Duskendale!

And yet he swore his sword to the current king, a man who killed my brother and refused to punish the murder of my good-sister, niece, and nephew. Now, he stands by while the current king and queen do terrible things. Perhaps Ser Barristan is a good man, and I’ll understand when I’m older (as Maester Cressen sometimes tells me), but I can’t bring myself to like him. Cousin Stannis believed he kept his oaths as dictated and therefore fulfilled his duty, while Myra very much hates him. I think he is disloyal. I understand that my House is gone, but, still! Did he have to serve King Robert? What do you think, Jon?

I hope to hear from you soon. I’ve convinced Myra to allow me to go down to the village and speak more with the smallfolk, although she insists that I have four guards with me at all times. Maybe if I can learn more about what they want, I can convince the people of King’s Landing to go north. I hope Lord Benjen brings you good news. Do you think Lord Reed would see it as an intrusion if I wrote my thanks to him, or would it be better if you pass on my sentiment?

Yours,

Dany.

P.S. Tell the Prince I can and will catch him one day!

*****
Catelyn walked through Winterfell’s halls, slowly making her way towards the upper balcony that overlooked the training yard. The sounds of clashing metal reached her long before she finally stepped out into the cool day.

Catelyn walked along the path, gazing down at her children in the courtyard, until she came to stand beside Ned in the middle of the balcony. He, too, stared at their children with sombre eyes.

He looked up when she came to stand beside him, nodding faintly in greeting. His face was lined with exhaustion. Catelyn understood her husband just a bit better now, and saw how much all these changes and large-scale decisions were weighing him down. Ned would have probably preferred a simple, quiet life as the lord of some small keep, although she couldn’t say the same for herself.

So far, while Ned technically succeeded in convincing the Northmen that change was needed, he’d been forced give up his plans for an alliance with Stannis Baratheon. Personally, Catelyn believed he could have mentioned other things during that final meeting to sway the lords, or in the end outright ordered them. She believed they could have been swayed away from Roose Bolton’s plans. The man was no popular in the North, despite the admiration the others had given his plan, while Ned was beloved. But she’d dared not speak at the time; she saw how some of the Northmen now saw her, after it became public that she’d undermined Ned for years in his own home. Some even believed Ned should have forsaken her. She’d protested joining the meeting so as to not lessen his position, but Ned was stubborn and insisted on showing the Lords and she was still his Lady.

Still, any word from her would have only been dismissed outright, and it had all gone too quickly to stop. She wished she could go back all those years and order the servants to leave Jon Snow alone. It would have saved them all much heartache had she simply ignored the boy rather than letting her jealousy make a petty woman out of her. It made her actions all the more painful, and regret pooled in her gut. Had she acted with honor, then she could have been of use to her husband in those talks.

“Have you given Lord Manderly’s proposition much thought, Ned?”

The Lord of White Harbor was a shrewd man, she’d come to see. No Lord became so rich and prosperous without having a clear head on his shoulders. She personally believed his bumbling behaviour was simply a front, one the honest Northmen took at face value.

She remembered how much he’d tried to underscore riches during the meetings, even though any Northman would know that such a tactic would only turn the Lords away from the alliance. If there was one thing the Northmen prided themselves on, it was just how different they were from the south. In that way, an alliance for personal gain—as Manderley had made it seem—would only push them away. She wondered now if he’d purposely done so, especially after his following proposal when all the other Lords had departed, of if he’d just honestly been showing his support. The Manderleys were extremely loyal to the Starks, but would that loyalty supersede Wyman Manderley’s self-interest?

“My Lord Stark, it grieves me to know that we couldn’t come to an agreement on an alliance with the south. As you know, I very much favoured it! If you decided you would like to continue down this avenue, I will be your staunchest supporter! I am, humbly, the Lord of the wealthiest Northern House, and we owe the Starks our eternal loyalty for allowing us to seek refuge here when we escaped the Reach. That being said, my family has much experiences in trading with the south and making money. My Lord, I believe a closer relationship could benefit us both.”

“Speak plainly, Lord Manderley, what is it you seek?” Ned asked, seated at the head table. Catelyn had stood by the door, lingering after she’d seen Manderley approach Ned.

“Of course, my Lord. Well, young Robb is nearly of marriageable age, and I have two
granddaughters whom I believe would be wonderful candidates for his wife. Both are talented, talented girls, my Lord.”

Ned looked startled, and Catelyn was as well. After all that had occurred, a marriage negotiation was the last thing she’d expected. Her eyes narrowed on the large man, instantly suspicious. Any plan that involved her children was one she paid serious attention to.

“I don’t doubt that they are, my Lord,” Ned responded quietly. “But I don’t see how marriage could possibly relate to the current problem.”

“Forgive my bluntness, Lord Stark, but I believe you need aid when it comes to finer negotiations, especially against that leech, Bolton. I would offer my services. A marriage between our children would allow me to informally pass on Lordship of White Harbor to my heir, Wylis, and I could accompany the bride to Winterfell and aid you in such unpleasant things as politics. If you still desire this alliance, I believe I could help.”

Ned’s eyes narrowed, and she saw anger there. He stood abruptly, but the other Lord didn’t flinch. “Am I right to say, My Lord, that you seek to manipulate me into this marriage?”

Manderly immediately bowed, as much as he was able, and shook his head. “House Manderly will always be loyal to House Stark. I will aid you as well I can, regardless, but this marriage would strengthen the bonds between us, and give you a more direct foothold over the sea trade. Forgive my saying so, but Roose Bolton is a dangerous man, and letting him gain power in the east—particularly naval power—is foolhardy.”

Ned narrowed his eyes, but exhaled as the anger drained away. He seemed much older. Her husband had no interest in these machinations, but they wouldn’t go away if he ignored them.

“This marriage would ensure my loyalty, my lord, although let it never be in doubt. I am, first, a grandfather who only seeks the best for his granddaughters. Should one of them be wed to your son, I will do all in my power to see that her happiness is never threatened.”

Ned stared at the man, face hard to read. Finally, he nodded. “I will give it some thought.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

When the Lord of White Harbor had turned to leave, he’d met Catelyn’s eyes in the hall. She couldn’t stop her suspicion from painting her face. Nevertheless, she curtseyed, and they exchanged meaningless pleasantries until he was gone.

“What do you think of it?” Ned asked, breaking Catelyn away from the memory.

She contemplated the question carefully, turning away to watch her children below. Robb was standing behind Arya, showing her the different parts of a bow while the avid girl listened. Theon stood beside him, looking bored and impatient. Bran was running around everywhere, excitable. Sansa was inside the castle, having decided to spend her afternoon with her friends under the watch of Jonelle Cerwyn. Catelyn rather liked the sweet, homely girl.

What could this marriage do to harm her children and, most importantly, what could it do to benefit them?

“I think,” Catelyn began carefully, “that Lord Manderly is a very intelligent man. Much more so than he appears. If he says he could get you this alliance, I believe him. And at least it’s plain what he gets out of this; a granddaughter wed into House Stark.”
Ned signed, rubbing his temple. She wondered if his headache was still plaguing him. Ever since he’d learned what Robert had allowed done to Daenerys Targaryen—even Catelyn had been shocked by it, and she didn’t know the King as well as Ned—he’d had trouble sleeping. She knew that the possibility of disappointing Stannis Baratheon also weighed down on his mind. The two men had developed an odd friendship over the years, although she didn’t understand what Ned liked about the man. Lord Stannis seemed terribly cold to her.

“I don’t want to force Robb into a marriage he may not want just to further some plot. My father did that and…” he trailed away, eyes going distant.

She swallowed. Lord Rickard’s unusual attempts to open up the North more to southern influence had inadvertently sparked resulted in his own death, and the death of his eldest son—my Brandon—and daughter. It had also driven the North farther away from the South than they’d been before.

“Ned, the south will resent the North if we tip the balance of power without including them. We need an alliance with them, if only to show that we’re not building our naval power for some other, darker purpose. Especially after all these years of simply weathering the Iron Islands.”

Ned looked startled, and she knew he’d probably not considered how the other Kingdoms may view this move. He planned to tell them the truth, and expected they’d take it at face value. But Catleyn had been raised amongst them, and if her father saw one of his bannermen building up their power all of a sudden, he’d grow paranoid, and may even act first. If that should happen to them, her children could be in danger.

Ned looked down at the children, thinking over her words. She stayed silent.

They were interrupted by Maester Luwin, who came bearing a letter from Lord Stannis. Ned immediately tensed. He took the letter, and upon her encouragement, opened it and read the words. His shoulders slowly relaxed, and a slight smile even graced his lips.

“Is Lord Stannis not angry, then?” she guessed when he was done.

“He’s disappointed. He recommended brokering an alliance with any willing House, and taxing the ore so that we could use the money for castles and glass houses. He also included this.” Ned held up a second letter, and she briefly saw the names of various Western locations. “It’s a recommendation for how to best defence against the Iron Islanders, directly from the Master of Ships. It details various attack and defence measures.”

Catelyn blinked, shocked. “That’s very generous of him.” Not at all what she expected from a man who’d just been rejected. Perhaps she’d judged Stannis Baratheon too soon.

“Maester,” Ned said, turning to Luwin, who was awaiting instruction a little bit away. “Transcribe these recommendations and send them to every House. Let them all know what Stannis Baratheon’s response is to our rejection. Let them see the man he is.”

Luwin took the letter carefully and bowed. “At once, my Lord.”

Catelyn smiled. Her husband may not know southern politics, but he knew how to sway the Northmen in some things. This would no doubt warm many Lord to Stannis. Briefly, she wondered if the Lord of Dragonstone had done it purposefully to put himself in a better light…

“I am writing to Lord Manderly,” Ned decided. “I will not agree to any marriage against Robb’s wishes, but I’ll invite him and his granddaughter to stay with us. If Robb grows close to one of them, I’ll revisit the possibility of marriage.”
Catteyn nodded. “A good plan, Ned.”

And so, a couple of months later, Lord Manderley’s large entourage entered the Main Gate of Winterfell. Catelyn stood beside Robb as they greeted Lord Wyman, his good-daughter Lady Leona, and his granddaughters Wynafryd and Wylla. Wyman eldest son Wylis—Leona’s husband—remained in White Harbor alongside his brother Wendel.

Catelyn stood beside Ned to greet them. The girls curtseyed prettily, greeting them in high, think voices. Catelyn—and most of her children—couldn’t stop looking at young Wylla, whose hair was dyed a brilliant green. The girl didn’t seem at all bothered by their stares.

“Your hair is green,” Robb blurted out, eyes wide.

Catelyn immediately shot her son a scandalized look, hissing, “Robb!” She turned to Lady Wylla to apologize, but the nine-year-old girl only put her hands on her hips and shot Robb a haughty, challenging scowl. At her sides, Leona and Wynafryd were shooting her quelling looks, but the girl ignored them.

“Yes, it is,” Wylla snapped. “And yours is red.”

Robb blinked at her, startled, but the younger girl didn’t back down from her glare. Arya was trying to stop her giggles, while Sansa looked between the two in worry.

Robb’s lips curled up, and he gave a bow that did Catelyn proud. “The color suits you, my lady.”

Wylla sniffed, but there was a little smile on her lips. “Thank you, my lord.”

*****

Dear Dany,

We’ve arrived at House Rosby, and they were particularly welcoming to us. Almost too much so, for my tastes. We’re to go to King’s Landing next, although the prince is very unenthused by the idea. We won’t have access to a Maester as the Prince isn’t planning to set foot in the castle while there; so I will say happy new year in advance. I believe your Nameday is in the first month of the year, and I regret that we didn’t get the chance to meet. I’ll send you a letter when we reach the next House after King’s Landing. I’m sorry I can’t say how long it will be. Prince Oberyn has plans to stay at some rented place while in the city, until uncle Benjen arrives. I’ll leave a letter with Syrio depicting the meeting in full; don’t worry Dany, he can be trusted.

I’ve thought about what you said, about your parents and your brother. It seems the Rebellion was a tragedy whose origins were years in the making. I wonder if it would have still occurred, but in a different way, had Prince Rhaegar not taken my aunt. I’m sorry for everything that has happened to you, due to the choices of others. I wish you could have had ten siblings, Dany, I wish you could have grown up happily amongst them.

Although then I would have never known you, and I selfishly hate the idea.

I hope Maester Aemon knows more about this prophecy. I think it’s foolish to force a marriage on the words of some pretend witch. I, too, don’t place much weight on such superstitious. I believe in the old gods, but they don’t dictate how one should live. The old gods exist in nature, in every tree
and rock and river. Unlike the Faith, they don’t intrude on daily life.

I’ve thought about what you said, in regard to Ser Barristan, and I don’t know what to say. I’ve asked the Prince, and he says that Barristan is a dog who needs a master, and will follow any man who can order him about. There were other, more unkind things, but the crux of the matter is that Oberyn Martell has no love for the Bold. Personally, but when I think about it, his actions do seem very disloyal. Its an uncomfortable thought, but if a man killed someone I swore my sword to, I don’t think I could then turn around and serve them, even if they spared my life. But we also don’t know the full details of the story.

Be careful amongst the smallfolk. There are evil, desperate men everywhere. I agree with Lady Myra about all the guards, so be safe. So much has happened to you this year, I’ve begun to grow paranoid with each letter I receive.

Yours,

Jon.

P.S. The Prince acknowledges you challenge. Personally, I think he’s much to enthused about the idea of getting kicked by a girl. Still, I don’t judge.

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Cersei Lannister started at her father, who sat calmly across from her as if they’d been discussing the weather.

“No…no, you can’t let him do this to me. You can’t! Father—”

“You’ve done this to yourself,” Tywin responded, and despite the calm exterior, there was a deep well of anger in his eyes. “You’ve tarnished our reputation to the point that they call you a ‘Mad Queen’. I’ve spent all my life,“ he bit out, “making House Lannister into a respected, powerful House, and now they mock us and whisper of madness. They call it the godss curse, for betraying the Targaryens. The most superstitious of fools now shy away from doing business with us. You’ve brought this upon our heads, and now you must mend it.”

“No! No, I’m the queen!” she protested, bordering on hysterical. “Father!” She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She couldn’t believe he was blaming her for this! It was all that little bitches fault! Why did no one understand? First Jaime, and now father!

“Silence. You will do this, Cersei, either with dignity, or you’ll be dragged out by guards, shaming yourself further. Know this, if you choose the second option, I will leave you there. You are my daughter, but the House comes first.”

She stared at him, feeling all the blood drain from his face. “How could you allow this. How? Something else, anything—!”

“Stannis Baratheon was insistent on this punishment,” Tywin bit out. On the table, his hand twitched as if he wanted to fist it, but resisted. “And Robert Baratheon agreed. You’ve caused him too many problems. His reputation plummets every moment, and the court is near empty.”

“But, but something else! Another punishment! Father, please! Why would you allow them to—!”

“Stannis Baratheon has threatened to pay off Robert’s entire debt to us, and ensure no further borrowing occurs,” Tywin bit out, cold. “If he does so, we lose all power over the crown. In exchange for this punishment, Baratheon has agreed to pay off the debt to the Iron Bank instead.
Your son is heir, Cersei; you don’t want the Iron Bank to get involved in his reign. They’ve got millennia of experience toppling regimes. In this way, we keep our power, solve an imminent issue, and bankrupt Stannis Baratheon. Not to mention patching up our reputation.”

She stared at him, not believing what she was hearing. “You’re using me as a pawn,” she said, voice cracking. “Me, your own daughter.”

Tywin met her gaze, inscrutable. “As I said, the House comes first. Jon Arryn went as far as to threaten annulment should I refuse. Make no mistake, Robert’s mind is made, and he is fool enough to see it through just to avoid being branded a coward.”

She felt the world sway. “They can’t do that,” she whispered, feeling sick. “That would delegitimize the children. Robert, Robert won’t do that to his children!”

Except they’re not his, and a part of him knows it. He’s never really cared for any of them. Cersei felt the full weight of what she’d done. “No, no he wouldn’t! I’ve given him two sons, I’ve fulfilled my duty, the realm would never stand for—”

“You underestimate just how unpopular you’ve made yourself, daughter,” Tywin said, brutally straightforward.

She could do nothing but breathe, near a panic. And then the witch’s words resonated in her mind, the very words that had pushed her into humiliating that little bitch, into showing her where the real power lay. “Queen you shall be … until there comes another, younger and more beautiful, to cast you down and take all that you hold dear.”

“What do I do?” she asked, pleaded. She got up and kneeled before her father, those horrible words spinning in her head. She clutched his legs, horrified. “Father, please…”

“You will take this punishment, and you will act as if it were all your idea. As if your guilt drove you to it. you will play your part perfectly, and eventually, the realm will see you as the victim of a cruel husband. Do not worry, daughter,” his voice grew chill, and the rage was there again. “This is not forever. Baratheon has made a grave mistake, pulling the lion’s tale. When your son is king he’ll revoke this whole farce, and bring you back. By then, the realm will have forgotten this whole thing, and our House will remind them what it means to be a Lannister.”

She drew closer, kneeling before him and hugging his legs, desperate as she looked into his eyes. She could feel the hot tears trailing down her face. “Promise me. Promise me, father, on mother’s grave. Promise me you’ll get revenge, that one day I’ll be back in my rightful place as queen.”

Tywin Lannister nodded, and she believed it with every fibre of her soul.

The next day, early at dawn, she stood before a carriage accompanied by a few guards. What was left of the court was there, watching with gleeful eyes. Her children were kept away, upon her request. She’d said farewell the previous day, making sure to tell Joffrey exactly who was responsible for her torment.

Robert stood there before the crowd, loudly declaring her punishment to all the realm, of how he could not allow such an atrocity to go unpunished, taking full credit for everything. But Cersei paid him no heed. Her eyes lingered on Jaime, who looked tormented. She didn’t keep the condemnation from her gaze. A part of her wanted to run to him and beg him to take her away, to run from all this. But that was foolish. If she ran, she’d never been queen again. Then, she turned to Lancel—her
Finally, she turned to the one responsible for all this. Daenerys Targaryen stood a little away from the crowd, beside Stannis Baratheon. The girl was dressed in bright, bold red. Underneath, she wore black leggings and boots, and black ribbons were braided into her hair, stark against the silver. The younger girl stared at her with her chin raised, as if Cersei was the one beneath her. A faint smile pained those vile lips.

That look was nearly enough to send Cersei into another rage. She clenched her hands so tightly that her nails punctured her skin, hot blood filling her palms.

She would kill Daenerys Targaryen, she swore. One way or another, she would see the girl dead. Cersei would make sure that she saw every moment of the whore's suffering.

With hatred in her heart, she turned and boarded the carriage behind her, taking her seat opposite the two Silent Sisters.

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Daenerys watched the carriage disappear into the distance, taking Cersei Lannister—she was queen no longer—to the Sept of Baelor’s basement, the place that houses the Silent Sisters of King’s Landing.

The women took vows of silence, chastity, and covered themselves completely in grey robes. They swore their lives to the Stranger, the god of Death. To be a Silent Sister was to be completely isolated from the living; the only body Cersei Lannister would ever touch again would be a corpse.

The false queen was stripped of her voice, her beauty, her position, and her ability to harm another. Daenerys had dreamed of this moment ever since she’d first gotten the idea, mere days after that vile woman had dared to humiliate her.

“It’s been a difficult year, Cousin,” she murmured, looking up at Stannis. “I think I’d rather like a break for a while.”

He walked beside her towards their quarters; they’d returned during the night, and she was very tired.

“Happy Nameday, Daenerys,” he responded simply. She threaded her arm through his, leaning closer, smiling as the sun finally make it over the castle walls. A brand new day; a better one.

On this morning, ten years ago, Rhaella Targaryen had died, as far as Dany was concerned, her mother was the last true queen of Westeros. Robert Baratheon had stolen her mother’s title and gave it to a vile, undeserving woman.

It was only fitting that this was also the day Cersei Lannister lost her crown.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to reparations_only! Happy birthday :D!!

Also, this is still Act 4, and it will end chapter 39-40.
Hope Cersei's punishment was worth the wait! The only method I could find in Westeros to set aside your wife without delegitimizing your children is to have her join the silent sisters.

Also, Dany's birthday here is January 19, 284. Jon's is May 5, 283.
Daenerys met Syrio Forel two weeks after Cersei Lannister was sent away. He was staying in a rented room in the city while he made connections with rich families and offered his services as a dancing master. It took a few days for news of the queen’s punishment to reach him, and a few more before he learned that Daenerys had returned to King’s Landing. He’d come to seek an audience with Lord Stannis, and had found it rather difficult not only because her cousin was a busy man, but because Stannis had no interest in speaking to men he didn’t know. When Syrio told Stannis that he’d been travelling with Jon as his dancing master, her cousin had only met the news with suspicion. Apparently, despite Syrio having travelled with Jon for months since Braavos, Stannis had had no idea of his presence—her cousin hadn’t even known about Braavos. Daenerys had cleared up the misunderstanding after being summoned, having rushed to them with more vitality than she’d felt in...too long.

“I was expecting him, cousin; Jon stayed in King’s Landing a few weeks ago. He couldn’t get a letter to me because the Prince refused to make his presence known at the castle.” Left unsaid was why Oberyn Martell so despised this city.

Syrio handed her Jon’s letter, and she was fairly bouncing in her desire to leave and read it. But she was also rather curious by this man who’d spent so much time about her betrothed. So, she simply tucked the parchment away for later.

“Keep me better informed, Daenerys,” he scolded. “Particularly when you’re expecting guests.”

“I’m sorry, cousin,” she responded, chagrined. “Jon tells me so much of their travels, and I sometimes forget that you don’t know of them as well.” To Dany, the letters were a private, special thing between her and Jon; sharing them wasn’t something she’d ever be comfortable with.

“It would be appreciated if the prince could bother to send the occasional missive,” Stannis muttered, scornful of Oberyn’s flighty ways. “It’s been too long since I’ve seen Jon Snow and evaluated his progress.”

He apologized to Syrio for wasting his time, and then sat the man down to ask him various questions
about Jon’s development. All in all, Stannis seemed pleased with the man’s account, particularly the fact that Jon spent his mornings under a maester’s tutelage during his stays at each House. Her cousin had been concerned about Jon falling behind in his lessons due to Oberyn’s “penchant for… spontaneity.”

Dany wondered if he’d wanted to say ‘stupidity’ but held himself back.

Stannis soon learned about Domeric Bolton’s presence and sent Dany another chastising look. She protested that time! Why would Prince Oberyn’s other squires be of any relevance?

“Have Maester Cressen give you a detailed account of the history of House Bolton,” he’d ordered.

Syrio had told them, in much greater details than the letters allowed, about where they’d been. However, he’d House names and such vague. Apparently, he cared little for politics, and only remembered such things when they were relevant to his job with Jon. Dany got the sense that he didn’t want to tell her cousin the names of all the places they’d been too…and for some reason, it made her want to keep silent as well.

Syrio told her stories of Jon’s stay in King’s Landing, and about his own experiences in the three week’s he’d been here. For Dany, it was a strange experience to learn how much the small folk spoke of her movements, although according to Syrio, she was a very controversial topic amongst them. Some viewed her with the awe that had been beaten into them for all highborn, while others loudly remarked upon the madness of her father. Syrio was an observant, quiet man, and told her that the second group were of the younger generation, and the majority of their lives had been under Robert’s reign.

Her cousin had met the information with disinterest—he cared little for the opinions of the smallfolk—but Dany saw an opportunity. Her heart was pounding as ideas formed.

This...this is something I can do.

“Jon tells me that the closer to the capital you got, the unhappier the smallfolk were. Many were travelling south to look for work. What about in the city? Do they have enough to eat? Are the taxes making their lives difficult?”

Both men expressed surprise at her question. Stannis was watching her carefully, his brow furrowed in a too-familiar concern. She ignored it; she was fine. Syrio admitted that he hadn’t asked much about such things, although the general atmosphere of King’s Landing did seem grim. He couldn’t say why that was. “I am new here, girl, and care little for politics besides.”

But he did live down in the city. Dany got an idea, heart pounding with interest. “Will you take me around the city, Syrio?”

Both men stared at her, nonplused.

“Absolutely not,” Stannis refuted, quickly launching into an argument. King’s Landing was dangerous, Syrio was a stranger, and, most of all, they had their own men if she continued to insist on these ‘visits.’ They didn’t need Syrio for such a task.

Syrio didn’t seem offended by Stannis’s blatant distrust; he merely raised an intrigued brow.

Dany was persistent. “Syrio has no loyalty to anyone in the city, cousin, and he lives down there, unlike our men who’ve spent all their time in the castle or the taverns. They don’t know anything about the real city. I’ve asked some of them, and they have no idea what the smallfolk think! Besides, when I went down to the village on Dragonstone, no one would speak to me honestly with
the guards hovering over my shoulders!” She turned to Syrio. “You were the First Sword of Braavos, and Jon told me how skilled you are; it would only be for a few hours every week.”

Syrio stroked his beardless face, “You have much faith in your betrothed, girl, but your guardian speaks true. I am a stranger to you.”

“Strangers are just people you don’t know well yet,” she contended. Besides, a man like him, with no ties to the highborn and little interest in politics, was the best type of person to spend her time with. As a Braavosi, he also surely had interesting stories of the Free Cities, and one thing she missed about the ore meeting was hearing personal accounts of Essos. Besides, he’d spent more time with Jon than anyone she knew, and she’d love to have time to ask him in detail, privately, about their journey. “In exchange, I can introduce you to families that may be interested in your services; I know many highborn children in the castle, and they’ll no doubt be returning to court now that the queen is gone.” While Dany wasn’t popular amongst the highborn—or at least they avoided being seen with her publicly—she still knew enough about them that she was confident she could find interested parties.

A mutually beneficial agreement, in her opinion.

Please, please...I have to get out of this castle.

In the end, Syrio seemed interested enough in her proposition that he agreed. It took a bit more convincing for her cousin, but the more they argued, the more impassioned she got...the more Stannis bent. He seemed almost relived. Eventually, her cousin accepted—on the conditions she kept two of their own men with her, and kept her face covered at all times. Dany insisted the men not be in full armour, which took more negotiating before they reached an agreement. By the end, she was excited to begin her search for interested men and women who may be open to moving to Moat Cailin.

Syrio regarded her amused curve to his lips. “Your betrothed is a child of stubborn will, girl, and you seem to match in that. An interesting pair. I could teach you the dance as well, should you be interested.”

“No,” Stannis responded briskly.

Dany was about to reject the proposal as well, as she had no interest in learning to fight, but stopped to frown at Stannis. “Why not?” she demanded, indignant.

He cut her a serious look. “Guards exist for a reason; you have no place learning the blade. It’s a much too dangerous pastime for a girl.”

She frowned at him, annoyed. “There are other women in the world that fight on their own, cousin!”

“And you will not be among them, Daenerys. Enough. On this, I will not bend. And cease arguing simply for the sake of it; we both know you have no interest.”

She opened her mouth to protest, and hesitated. She really didn’t want to learn; as he’d said, she had guards and always would; and when she grew up, Jon would protect her. Daenerys pictured the drills and long hours her guards spent practicing—they were always sweaty and exhausted by the end—and wrinkled her nose; she’d much rather spend her time elsewhere. But she also didn’t like being told she wasn’t allowed to do something, even by her cousin. Daenerys was rather spoiled about getting her way, and she knew it.

“I would be a wonderful water dancer,” she settled on, sending her cousin a challenging, haughty look.
“I have no doubt you’d be excellent at felling any man who stood in your way, Daenerys,” he replied, faintly ironic. The words mollified her, but she felt like there was another meaning to them, so she only sniffed in response.

Syrio snorted, and they both turned to him, almost having forgotten his presence. The bald man had a slight smile on his thin lips. She smiled a bit sheepishly.

Stannis cleared his throat, “Yes, well, I’ll allocate the first, third, and fifth’s mornings of the week to this…curiosity of yours, Daenerys. You’re to be back before the noon meal.” He turned to Syrio. “I will, of course, pay you for your services…?”

“Syrio is fine, Lord; we have little use for titles in Braavos.” A thin smile.

Her cousin didn’t seem comfortable with this lack of formality. Dany decided she’d enjoy Syrio’s presence.

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Dear Dany,

It’s the second week of the new year, and we’re in King’s Landing. I can understand what the Prince so dislikes about this place; it does have a rather unpleasant odour; fish and metal and waste. We arrive here eight days ago, and it was almost shocking to see this large number of people all in one place. Braavos was a massive city, but it’s island layout created an illusion of smaller places grouped together. King’s Landing is not the same; it’s one huge, crowded collection of bodies and buildings; shocking considering how long I’ve spent out in the open. Here, one can almost feel boxed in by the buildings that rise four or five stories high. Every House we’ve been to so far could fit in this place, Dany, with room to spare. It would likely be easy to disappear in King’s Landing, considering its multitude of small side streets and hidden corners. The Red Keep towers over everything, casting a massive shadow when the sun is low in the sky. It’s not larger that Harrenhal, but its place atop Aegon’s Hill makes it seem taller.

Prince Oberyn disappeared on the first day, and I assume he went to spend his time getting lost in houses of ill repute. I’ve never seen such a hateful look on the prince’s face, as at that moment he spent staring up at the castle. I knew in my mind the tragedy of what happened to his family, but today is the first day I felt it. I’ve never lost anyone close to me, Dany, and I hope I never do.

Domeric and I spent the first day travelling around with Syrio in search of housing. We were finally successful on our third day of searching, and found a small room on the fourth floor of a building near ‘Flea Bottom.’ It’s not the best area, but Syrio only plans to stay there until he has enough coin to find a more permanent residence closer to the castle. There’s a tavern nearby, and he seems satisfied with the location overall. Domeric and I slept on cots on the floor during the three weeks we were here, and it took some time to get used to the noise. It seems that someone is always awake after dark in King’s Landing, although I imagine it’s much quieter up in the castle. I missed the silence of the forest and fields.

Syrio has gone out every day in search of possible work, but he’s having a difficult time so far. Water Dancing isn’t well known in Westeros, and the teaching profession depends on recommendations. He has one from Oberyn and Domeric, but so far no luck. Would you ask Lord Stannis to sponsor him, Dany? I promise he is a talented man and any who find themselves in his care will benefit. Even those aspiring to be knights would find the footwork and balance taught in water dancing to be helpful.

The prince returned two days ago alongside my uncle Benjen. Lord Howland Reed has a
miraculous source of fuel in the swamps called ‘peat moss’ that can be dried and burned. My uncle brought a large sack full with him, and one small handful burned for an hour and produced a lot of heat. It has a pleasant, rich scent and no negative outcomes. The crannogmen had been using it in place of wood for centuries, and it grows so quickly that there’s no chance of it running out as long as you leave a bit behind during harvesting. We’ll need hundreds of hands to help up cultivate, collect, dry, and export the moss, so your plan to persuade the smallfolk is definitely necessary. The moss will make a lot of gold considering it’s so much lighter to ship when compared to wood. No doubt many will be interested in look North for work.

We’re travelling through the Reach next, according to the Prince. He has no interest in going directly south to Dorne through the Stormlands, so we’re headed west tomorrow when we leave. House Footly of Tumbleton is our next destination. I’m taking the sack with me, and hopefully, the House of the reach, which spend much of their gold importing wood for the winter, will be interested in trade.

Part of me want to travel to the castle and seek vengeance for you, Dany, but I believe you when you say the queen will be punished. The longer I spend with the prince, the more conflicted I am about the events of the Rebellion and the current royal family. Surely, a king should be honourable and protect his people. Why else do they exist?

Your Nameday is in a fortnight. I debated giving Syrio the pin I bought in Braavos, alongside this letter, but I found that I didn’t want to. I want to be the one to hand it to you, Dany, foolish as it may sound.

Be well,

Yours,

Jon

First Moon, 11th day

Tywin Lannister intimately knew what it meant to be humiliated. He’d grown up surrounded by laughter, and to this day hated that sound more than any other. His father had laughed, like a boisterous fool with his mistresses, like a feeble dog with his bannermen. Other’s had laughed as well. The lords of the Westerlands, those who should have been loyal to House Lannister, chortled at amiable Tytos, their pathetic lord who couldn’t say no even if it killed him. Oh, how men had laughed at his father, mocked House Lannister’s fall to ruin, took advantage of Tytos’s generosity. Beyond them, the lords of the realm, who’d entertained themselves watching the Lions fall.

Tywin remembered being a boy of ten, seated in the Great Hall of Casterly Rock during another great feast his father threw to please his bannermen, and choked down the shame as he watched men and women openly mock Tytos in his own Keep. He remembered protesting the marriage of his sister, Genna, to a Frey. Not even the heir, just a measly second son, simply because Tytos wanted to please that disgusting Walder Frey. His father had forgotten the meaning of their name, their legacy, and the realm had laughed.

Yes, Tywin was well acquainted with humiliation and had decided, years later in the midst of war, that he would no longer tolerate it. He was Tywin Lannister, heir to a legacy of Lions, and he wouldn’t allow the sheep to humiliate him any longer.
And so, after the War of the Ninepenny Kings, a newly knighted boy of eighteen, Tywin had returned to Casterly Rock determined to wage another war. He would show them all just what it meant to cross a Lannister. He would drive that lesson in so deeply that the realm would never again dare to laugh at his family.

First, he’d given his brother, Kevan, an army of five hundred seasoned knights to rid the Westerlands of looters, bandits, and drunks. Then, within the year, he’d collected most of what was owed to them—the considerable sum Tytos had freely lent—and stopped the destitution of House Lannister. Those who could not pay, he’d demanded they give him hostages as collateral, fully prepared to execute them should the bannermen not comply. Kevan’s own wife, Dorna Swyft, had been such a hostage.

But Tywin’s efforts had been too new, his power too feeble, and many outright ignored the edicts. Lord Reyne of Castamere had laughed and counselled his friends to dismiss Tywin, stating that he was just a pathetic boy who wouldn’t follow through. Lord Tarbeck of Tarbeck Hall had come to Casterly to convince Tytos to rein his heir in. Tywin had ordered the man imprisoned for his insubordination, and House Tarbek had retaliated by capturing his Lannister cousins. He’d wanted to push through regardless—enraged that they’d dare such an act against their liege lord—but his weak father had bowed before the pressure and released Tarbeck, forgiving his debt. Tywin had felt rage and disgust like never before. Once more the realm had laughed, and now Tywin’s threats went increasingly unheeded.

That’s when he’d realized that he needed to make an example of the offenders, to show the realm what happened to those who humiliated Tywin Lannister.

He’d gathered an army in secret, then sent a missive to Reyne and Tarbeck, demanding they come to Casterly for punishment. As predicted, they’d ignored him—and given him leave to march his men and eradicate both Houses. He’d ordered the slaughter of every man, woman, and child of their blood. Razed their castles to the ground. He’d been so brutal that songs were sung of it. Finally, Tywin had built his reputation and taught the realm to fear the Lannister’s.

No longer did the anyone dare to laugh.

“I’ve grown complacent, Joanna,” he murmured, staring up at her portrait above his hearth. “Once more, they laugh at us, now spouting jeers of madness. Our daughter rots amongst the Sisters, all because the realm has forgotten what it means to cross a Lannister.”

Tywin gazed up at his beloved wife—and felt longing in his heart. He’d hated all laughers but her own. He’d scorn all women but her, having loved her since boyhood, his beautiful cousin. He’d run the realm with an iron fist when he’d been Hand, and yet at home, she’d been the one to rule. His fierce, cunning lioness, lovely as the dawn.

Her nail dug into his arm, face covered in sweat and devoid of blood. Tywin pleaded with all the gods, cried like a babe, begging her to live. But the demon in her womb had taken her life in exchange for his own. His heart was dying, and for all his wealth and power, there was nothing he could do to stop it.

The struggles of man were mere amusements to the gods.

“She must be queen, Tywin,” she said, voice feeble. “Swear—swear it to me. Cersei will be queen and our blood will rule.” Tears fell from her hazy gaze, and her face was one of fierce determination. “Our blood will rule that miserable place.”

“I swear it, Joanna,” he vowed, sobbing for the first, and last, time. Tywin Lannister’s sole moment
of weakness. “I swear it.”

“She’ll be queen,” she panted, hand growing weaker. “Queen.”

“Yes.”

She smiled then, as tears continued to fall. “I’m sorry, Tywin. So sorry…”

“No,” he moaned, “Joanna, no.”

“Please…love…him…”

She died, and so did he.

He hadn’t been able to uphold that last request, couldn’t bring himself to love that monster, but he’d done everything in his power to place their daughter on the throne. But he’d failed to keep her there, and Joanna’s portrait was condemning him for breaking his vow. Their daughter had been cast aside and sentenced to rot in darkness. Their golden child, forced into the shadows.

One king took his son, and another took his daughter.

The first a friend, and second the son of one. Their betrayals were proof that only family mattered in this world. And they’d shamed his family.

It was unforgivable.

He walked over to his desk, a large, ornate creature carved with lions, and carefully sat upon the red leather chair. He surveyed his study, taking in all the markings of wealth and power. Rugs and tapestries in brilliant red and gold, dark wood trappings, a massive hearth with Joanna’s painting above it. Shelves full of rare and prized books.

Only the best for a Lannister.

He opened a drawer and carefully took out a simple wooden box. Inside were rare cigars from the Summer Islands. The plant from which they grew took four years to cultivate and was only harvestable for a very brief moment of time. Askaru, it was called; as soon as the plant flowered, it began to die. The leaves had to be picked the moment the flowers bloomed to guarantee that rare, rich flavour. When smoked, they had an earthy, spicy scent and a calming effect.

Tywin Lannister did not drink or indulge himself much in earthly pleasures. Yet he smoked a single one on two specific occasions: when planning revenge and when celebrating revenge.

So far, he’d smoked them in pairs.

Carefully, he cut the tip of a new one, allow it a few moments in the open air and place it in his mouth. Then, he lit a match and held it carefully underneath the cigar, not allowing the flame to touch it lest he ruin the flavour.

Finally, it lit and released its pleasant scent into the study. Tywin took a deep, controlled breath, and exhaled a ring of grey smoke.

The Lord of Lannister leaned back, puffing slowly as he contemplated the order of events.

When he’d heard of what had occurred to the Targaryen four months prior, he’d been aghast at his daughter’s actions. He had no care for the child, but the method Cersei had employed was so self-destructive and impulsive, that Tywin could barely fathom it. Even a fool could see that such an
action could only damage one’s reputation.

Already, tales were spreading, which he’d at first attributed to how public the event had been. Naturally, they’d talk for a while, until Jon Arryn had time to suppress the rumour and give the queen a small slap on the wrist to placate the masses. The idea had repulsed Tywin, but he was no fool; Cersei needed some form of ‘pinishment’ to satisfy the highborn. Despite the fact that House Targaryen was gone, the child was still highborn, and the dragons had cultivated a certain degree of instinctive loyalty amongst the Houses, and a scant ten years of a new regime wasn’t long enough to quell such a tie.

Westerosi society had been founded on ties of loyalty, long before the dragons had conquered. Furthermore, her young age would touch the weakest hearted of lords and ladies, and most would have to decry the act—even if they did not care—simply to uphold a mask of morality. The highborn did so love to see themselves as superior.

So, Tywin had swallowed his distaste for this small humiliation and pragmatically waited for the news of Cersei’s punishment. A public acknowledgement perhaps, a gift to Lord Stannis in repentance.

But the tale only spread, worse with each alliteration, and so had new stories of the King’s approval to keep the account fresh for the gossips. Two months after the incident, children were being recalled from court, and the news had spread to the lowest of lowborn.

Mad Queen, they called his daughter.
Fat drunk king, they whispered of Robert.
Suddenly, everyone was remembering the Sack, recalling their hatred for the Lannisters, recalling the wrongs done to two other Targaryen children, which the new King also hadn’t punished.

Tywin began to suspect that Jon Arryn was purposefully allowing this to continue. The Lord of Lannister had ridden for King’s Landing the very next morning. He’d been met with the Hand of the King, who’d simply said they were trying to quell the rumours, but had little success.

“She’s your daughter, my Lord of Lannister,” Arryn murmured, his old, weathered eyes patient. “How could I possibly have the power to punish her?”

“You’re not this foolish, Lord Arryn,” Tywin snapped. “You know as well as I that the people needed some way to dismiss this incident. You’ve allowed it to fester, instead.”

Arryn only sighed. “I am ageing, my lord. I have so many responsibilities as Hand; they’re catching up to me.”

“Then perhaps you should be replaced,” Tywin returned, chill.

Arryn had not backed down.

Tywin had understood then, that Jon Arryn was seizing this opportunity to diminish his power in court. The old falcon had never been comfortable with Tywin’s influence at court, and Tywin’s spies told him that Joffrey was not turning out to be the prince anyone had wished for. Spoiled, selfish, cruel.

But still a child of lions. Still the grandson of Tywin Lannister.
Arryn was trying to get rid of Cersei in order to increase his power over the crown prince. Perhaps over the king, as well. He’d perfectly made use of a politically dangerous opportunity to see it done. Tywin, who hadn’t expected such boldness form the passive man, had been too late to stop him.

Stannis Baratheon’s participation had been a surprise, and the punishment he’d demanded had sent Tywin into such a rage he’d nearly declared war.

Tywin took a slow puff and released it. “I wanted to call the banners right then. To remind King’s Landing what happened when the Lannister army appeared at their gates.”

Had Joanna been alive, they could have discussed this at length. But now all he had was her silent likeness. Still, the cigar usually loosened him up enough that he didn’t mind speaking to it, only here in complete privacy. The servants of Casterly Rock knew not to disturb him at this time.

“But I don’t play games unless I know I’ll win.”

Tywin was aware of his strengths and weaknesses. He’d had the patience and intellect to be Hand of the King, but he was no genius at war strategy. Tywin was a man who waited to see which way the winds blew before committing himself to violence.

He’d challenged the Reynes and Tarbecks only after he’d had an army ready. They’d had no time to plan a proper defence, and had thus fallen easily.

He’d joined Robert’s cause only after news of Rhaegar’s defeat reached him. He’d ordered the murder of the crown princess and her children to win Robert’s loyalties, and ensure Cersei’s place as queen.

In both cases, Tywin carefully chose his moment to strike. In this case, a war was not the answer, although his pride had demanded immediate retribution.

Had he called the banners, it was a risk that Jon Arryn would have made good on his threat, and Robert Baratheon would have annulled his marriage. Tywin would have lost not only a queen, but also an heir, spare, and princess of Lannister blood. Not only that, but then Robert would have five hostages in his power; Tywin’s entire family. And the Lord of Lannister would be left with only a crippled, murderous monster. Robert was an impulsive fool; Tywin couldn’t risk calling the bluff only for the king to follow through just to prove that he could.

No, Tywin would lose a war. He was no match for Stannis Baratheon strategically, nor were his men numerous enough to challenge the combined might of the crownlands, the Vale, and the North. Dorne, of course, would stay out of it; they hated all the kingdoms. The Stormlands were under the power of Robert’s brother, Renly, who was now Master of Laws; he’d support the crown. As for Highgarden…with the position of queen free, and any contestant for heir now made bastards, they would likely ally with Robert. The Tyrell girl was young yet, but the promise of engagement would sway them.

The Westerlands would face a war on all sides, and they’d lose.

Next, Tywin had considered a political battleground to keep Cersei from the Sister, but dismissed it quickly. While many houses would swarm the newly empty positions at court, they’d be weak families at best. Most of the Great Houses had publicly decried the queen’s actions, and many of their most powerful bannermen would follow suit. Tywin had already sent letters to many potential allies before leaving Casterly Rock, and been met with support from some, tentative rejection from others, and no response from a few. Too many would use this as an opportunity to bring down the influence of the Lannister’s while also getting closer to the crown.
Arryn and his supporters had played their game well.

So, Tywin had switched his tactics towards minimizing the consequences. He’d tried to bribe them into another punishment, perhaps allowing him to take Cersei back with him, but the lord of Dragonstone was fixated on the Silent Sisters, and Arryn hadn’t disagreed. When Stannis had then threatened to pay off the crown’s debt to the Lannisters, further crippling Tywin’s power, he’d manoeuvred the younger man to use his newfound fortune to pay off Iron Bank instead. Robert’s borrowing had already been a concern for Tywin, as had Baratheon’s newfound wealth, so he’d agreed to this punishment to solve two future problems. They’d already had him, but he was more skilled in getting the best out of a bad deal.

*Power exists where people think it exists.*

“I used her as a pawn, Joanna. Our daughter. She left me no choice; she tarnished our name.” He didn’t dare look at the portrait, just continued to puff on the shortening cigar. His body felt languid.

He’d not left Cersei to her punishment, of course. He’d already sent loyal women to the Sept to join the Sisters, ordering them to serve Cersei in the manner by which she was accustomed. Despite now being a Silent Sister, she was still a Lannister and thus *worth more*. For all his preaching and piety, the High Septon just a man in the end, easy to bribe. Cersei would have the best of everything; a Sister in name only. After Joffrey ascended to king and released her, Tywin could make use of her devotion and service to repair her reputation. He’d also work on besmirching Robert as a cruel husband whose lusts for drink and other women had driven him to force his poor wife into such a harsh punishment for so small an incident.

He knew many would agree that the Silent Sisters was too brutal for the act, when the story had time too cool and the details began to blur. And when the Targaryen became a woman and able to marry her bastard, few would care for her fate any longer. Tywin would be free to act.

But his plans would take *time*. If he acted too soon, too impulsively, some of those responsible could escape, and the players were simply too powerful—individually and together—to take lightly. He’d let them think they’d won, that they’d cowed the Lion, and then he’d remind the realm what happened to those who laughed at Tywin.

“I will find out who participated in this game, find out who conspired to humiliate us, and bring them to *heel*.”

Tywin Lannister played to win.

*****

Dear Jon,

*Syrio and your letter arrived a fortnight after the former queen’s punishment. She was sent to the Silent Sisters, Jon. Now she won’t be able to torment me, or anyone, any longer. The Silent Sisters are sworn to serve the Stanger; they relinquish their names, take vows of chastity and silence, and cover themselves completely. Everything that Cersei Lannister once had, all her power, is gone now.*

*With the queen is gone now, and things are changing. Lord Arryn, the Hand of the King, has taken prince Joffrey under his power and greatly restricted his movements. The prince can no longer run to his mother when displeased, and the King has no interest in his cries. Now, he can no longer hurt me and easily get away with it now. Lord Arryn thinks it unseemly for a prince to harm a woman and punished him the first time he tried it. I fully admit to enjoying his anger.*
It was an interesting lesson to learn—how quickly power can be stripped away. Myra says to take it to heart, because as long as we have a name, others will try to take it from us. Your news about the resource was a welcome one. Here in King’s Landing, it would be very desirable in the Winters.

I’ve convinced my cousin to allow Syrio to take me down to the city, and in exchange, I’ll help him find families open to a dancing master. Syrio lives amongst the smallfolk, so he likely understands the capital better than my guards do. With his help, I can know more of the smallfolk and speak to them myself. When I was in Dragonstone, I found that the smallfolk were extremely uncomfortable talking to me. No matter how much I asked about what may displease them, they insisted that living at Dragonstone was the best thing in their lives. Ser Justin told me that they would never tell me of their problems, for fear that cousin Stannis would punish them for their words. Don’t worry Jon, I’ll have two guards with me as well, but we’ll all be in disguise.

Also, I’ve written to my Uncle Aemon about this prophecy of Rhaegar’s. Apparently, a witch came to court in my great-grandfather’s time, and prophesized that a prince would be born to my mother and father, and this son would stop a great evil from devouring Westeros. Apparently, this prince would bring dragons back to life. My uncle admits that he and Rhaegar believed the witch, and much of what they did was with the prophecy in mind. They were trying to make sure it all came true, and my uncle regrets it all, saying that it ruined many lives. Don’t tell the prince about this, please, Jon. Knowing that Rhaegar may have abandoned my good-sister due to some silly words would only make the anger he feels worse. Even I find myself so, so incredulous over my brother’s actions! Uncle Aemon told me to live for myself, Jon, and not for some words of the future. “Only the gods can see what will come; mortals are just silly children grasping at air.”

I hope this letter reaches you well at House Footly.

Yours,

Dany

PS: I’m sure you’re aware of the history between House Bolton and House Stark, Jon. Take care.

First Moon, 25th day

*****

Dear Dany,

We’ve been at House Footly for just over three weeks now, waiting for your letter. We’ll be moving on in the next day or so and heading to Bitterbridge, the seat of House Caswell. The Reach is so different in their mannerisms, Dany, it’s almost startling. They speak in such complicated, ‘flowery’ ways, and for every hundred words they say what would only take me ten words. The first week amongst Lord Footly and his family required that I learn a whole slew of new words. They speak quickly and fluidly, and it took me a while to understand just what point was being made. Even Domeric, who is very good at listening and understanding people, seemed baffled at first. The trick seems to be to follow their hands, rather than words; when they reach the truly important topics, their hands will be raised in a flurry of emphasis.

Sometimes I think that if you restrained their limbs, they’d be made mute.

Still, they’re a rather pleasant people overall. They don’t seem to be very fond of the prince, but by this point, that’s no longer relevant. Half of the time I don’t even know if I’m fond of him, Dany. I showed the moss to Lord Footly, and he seemed very interested indeed. He’s promised to contact uncle Benjen for more information, and perhaps to set up trade. It would be a major achievement,
considering he is Lord over such a hub of trade.

Domeric and I spent much of our free time outside in Tumbleton. It’s a large market town that is busy in trade. I’ve seen men from all over the kingdoms purchasing goods, although the majority seem to be from the Westerlands and Stormlands. This town was a major battleground in the Dance of the Dragons. It was burned to ash when the blacks were betrayed and their dragons were unleashed upon the populous. It’s long since been rebuilt, but the people don’t hesitate to tell the story of the First and Second Battles of Tumbleton. Everywhere in the kingdoms, Dany, I just find more and more stories of your family.

I haven’t had much luck finding smallfolk that may be interested here; those that live have satisfying lives and riches. Still, I did spread the word that there was work in Moat Cailin, and that we’d accept any man or woman interested in joining, no matter who they were. Hopefully, a few of them will head north. I’ll keep trying along the way.

I’ve thought about this prophecy, and I will not tell the prince of your brother’s motivation. Let’s live in the present, Dany, and only look towards a stable, ordinary future. Whatever great evil that witch apparently saw didn’t come to pass, and likely won’t.

Take care when you’re amongst the smallfolk,

Yours,

Jon

PS: Yes, I know. Thank you.

Second Moon, 10th day

*****

Jaime was very drunk, very irritated, and trying his very best to get back to the castle without falling into a gutter. The famed kingslayer, now nothing but another pathetic man that used drink to escape his own thoughts.

“I finally ‘ave somethin’ in common with thah pig,” he slurred, then chortled like it was hilarious. This early, with the sun just starting to rise, the streets were empty but for a few stragglers and some earlier risers. Both groups gave him a wide breadth as he lurched forward. Jaime was used to being avoided, of course, but usually, that was because people knew him. This was the first time he’d been anonymous and avoided still.

He must look terrible if even his Lannister looks weren’t enough to draw others to him. It figured, considering he’d spend the night with a constantly full cup of ale.


And the alcohol wasn’t even doing its job properly, considering his mind was still able to function enough to remember. And back to his room was obviously not mentally taxing enough, because he couldn’t escape his thoughts! At this point, he even wished there was someone around to talk to, but who was he kidding? Jaime Lannister had no friends.

As a youth, it was because his parents had strict ideas of who was a worthy companion, and also because Cersei absolutely hated anyone close to him. Tyrion, sometimes, was companionable, but there was always a tension between the brothers, underlined by how differently they were treated.
Tyrion was only his friend in private, away from the judgement of others. As a squire, all the other boys had been envious of his skills and money, both of which he’d gloated over. Plus, he’d been a moody shit due to being separated from Cersei. Then, when he’d joined the kingsguard…

“I was only ‘fifteen, when I joined ‘em. Youngest knight evah.” He’d been so proud of that fact, so proud to be amongst those legendary men. “An’ I idolized ‘em all, Hightowe’ and Selmy and- and Arthur Dayne! Idolized ‘em,” he muttered to the street as if it should be listening with rapt attention. Rhaegar and Jon Connington, as well, although they hadn’t been kingsguard. But those men hadn’t been his friends. He hadn’t spent enough time with them to get there, although he’d been…hopeful.

“I’ve only evah had…Cersei…but she’s gone now. My…fault.”

*Always my fault.*

Cersei was gone, the king was back to his old ways acting as if his marriage ending was of no consequence, and the highborn were slowly getting back into their normal days of gossip, schemes, and petty rivalries. Everything was different, and yet they all acted like nothing had changed. No, instead they now competed for the empty throne that belonged to his sister, brushing her existence away like it meant nothing.

For Jaime, everything was different. He no longer had a *purpose.*

He’d joined the kingsguard, all those years past, because he’d wanted to spend his life by Cersei’s side, knowing that he’d never be able to stomach marrying another woman. When a man found the love of his life, all others seemed like cheap replicas in comparison, repulsive and not worthy of his time.

Back then, as a young boy of fifteen, he’d thought dedicating his life to hers a worthy task. He’d become a famed knight, protecting the queen he secretly loved from the shadows. A heroic, romantic story, just like the dozens he’d grown up idolizing as a boy.

Yet he’d failed at everything. The woman he loved had slipped farther and further from sanity, and he’d never noticed. No, he’d been the *cause.* He’d made her doubt his love, abandoned her to a cruel husband’s hands.

And for what? A tiny girl he’d allowed to charm him, like some faithless fool? A Targaryen whose presence filled him with guilt for a queen past, for a princess gone, for two children his father had butchered?

He, Jaime Lannister, had found himself so desperate for absolution and *companionship* that he’d grasped onto Daenerys’s forgiveness like a drowning man. He’d never wanted to break his oath to a king, he’d never wanted to forsake his promise to Rhaegar.

He’d just wanted to be a knight and love his sister.

But his name was tarnished, and his Cersei was gone.

He could no longer look at Daenerys without seeing his sister’s condemning gaze before she was shipped off like waste to live with the dead and the darkness. In a way, her mad ravings had been right; Daenerys really had been the cause of her fall. But he knew that a queen wouldn’t have been allowed banished had it not been the will of many others.

Daenerys had been the catalyst, but Cersei’s actions had been the cause.
A traitorous part of him believed that the woman who’d fallen to madness and ordered him to kill a child deserved her fate. He’d felt so betrayed in that moment; like a creature to be used. The rest of him remembered the years of only having her, the stolen moment between them.

How could he miss his sister, yet be so conflicted about the queen she’d become? How could one man handle the weight of such self-loathing?

Two months she’d been gone, and Jaime found himself wishing for war, if only so there was something he could do to push away his thoughts. Some mindless task where he felt useful, where he could thrust his guilt into the chest of some enemy. The day she’d been sent away, he’d even confronted his father about it. How could Tywin Lannister have allowed this to happen to his daughter? The invincible Lion of Lannister would never have stood for this humiliation!

But all his father had said was that sometimes, battles were lost for the war to be won.

“A Lannister is worth more. Remember that, and be ready to serve your family when the time comes.”

So, he went back to the duties he could barely stomach, a pawn dressed in white, serving outside the door of a king who squealed like a pig and fucked whore after whore.

He stood by while his eldest son was taken under the hand of Jon Arryn, his life piled with new duties and standards of conduct. Although honestly, he didn’t protest too deeply. He saw what Joffrey was, and some discipline would do him well.

It was for his other children that he felt the most guilt. His daughter and youngest son cried for their mother, not knowing why she was gone. He could do nothing for them; comforting them wasn’t his place, and he’d never felt comfortable spending time with them, lest someone grow suspicious. Besides, despite being of my loins, I’ve never bonded with them. They’d always been Cersei’s children more than his own. He’d never been truly interested in knowing them; only selfishly proud that they were his own, rather than Robert’s.

Because everything else belonged to the man. Even Jaime’s life was his. A kingsguard, trapped in white, his reason for joining gone now. He couldn’t ever leave; he’d be hunted down like a dog and either executed or sent to the Wall. Robert wouldn’t release his oath; the pig hated Jaime as much as he hated the king. And if he ran and avoided capture until he got back to Casterly Rock, it was likely his father would go to war to prevent Jaime’s punishment—and he knew the odds of winning. Much as he ached for conflict, House Lannister would lose should they declare war on the crown. And unlike when he’d killed Aerys, Tywin didn’t have critical information to use to negotiate Jaime’s pardon this time.

He was truly fucked.

Well, until Joffrey ascends to the throne…then everything will change.

With a sharp sigh, he tried to force the circling thoughts away, stubbornly concentrating on taking stable steps. No matter how long he contemplated these truths, they wouldn’t change. His life was now just a bleak, endless repetition of serving a king he hated amongst a group of corrupt brothers and under the leadership of a hypocrite he’d once worshipped. Until whatever his father was planning came to fruition, this was his reality.

But he didn’t have to weather it sober. Yesterday, after his duties were over, he’d decided the best use of his time was getting good and drunk. But he hadn’t wanted to be alone with his thoughts that night. He’d gone to his room, changed into plain pants, a tunic, and a brown cloak, and made his
way into the city. He’d walked far, far away from the normal spots in the richer part of the city that the castle guard frequented, down into gloomy flea bottom where he’d not be recognized. Although, with his shaggy, unkempt hair and growing beard, it was likely he’d have gone undisturbed even in uptown.

He’s spent his night at a dingy, noisy tavern, amongst cutthroats and whores and other men like him, those with guilt and regret and loneliness in their breast. Watching some entertainment or other. He’d also briefly gotten into a fight, he hazily recalled, but couldn’t remember the cause. He touched his jaw briefly, feeling the ache, but for the life of his couldn’t remember how that fight had ended. It’s possible that the man had punched him and then just stayed away. He did recall that he’d been kicked out of that tavern and forced to stagger into another.

Shaking his head with a sigh, he kept walking. Slowly, the pounding of his head increased while his staggering decreased as he sobered up. On the bright side, his head hurt so much that he couldn’t think of anything. Couldn’t recall how he now had nothing to live for. How he’d failed his love, had no friends, couldn’t bond with his children.

How Daenerys turned away, eyes cold, whenever she saw me. How the brief companionship with Stannis Baratheon had turned into frigid formality whenever the man was near. How Myra Vela—no, Baratheon, now—had started staring at him in accusation once more, just like she’d done all those years ago.

“I just can’t win,” he muttered, exhausted.

He finally made it to the castle just over an hour after morning meal, his stomach rumbling and exhausted. He could already hear Selmy’s lecture, and his aching head protested. Since he was already going to be punished for missing morning drills, he may as well grab something to eat and sleep off his hangover; take the lecture after he woke.

He was in no mood for a confrontation at that moment.

But it seemed the gods really had it in for him. Just as he was entering the castle from one of the small eastern entrances, a small form accompanied by three men blocked his path. Both parties jerked into a halt, and Jaime blinked stupidly down at Daenerys, who was dressed in a plain tunic and covered in a cloak. Her hair had been pinned up tightly in a braided bun. Beside her was a slight man Jaime hadn’t seen before—he was bald with thin lips and a hooked nose. Behind the pair was Ser Justin and another knight he vaguely recognized. Both stared at him in quickly mounting hostility.

Daenerys eye’s frosted. She pointedly turned away, reading up to draw the hood over her head, masking her distinctive hair and handing low over her eyes. For a crazy moment, he wondered if he’d caught her running away! But that was ridiculous; she’d gotten everything she wanted. What did she have to escape from?

“Early morning stroll?” he asked, voice dripping venom.

She pointedly walked past him, contemptuous. The stranger shot him an intrigued look as he passed. Justin shouldered him hard as he followed them, making Jaime grunt and stagger. The irritation that move elicited, compounded by his still moderate drunkenness, and the anger he felt for how she now treated him, were the only things that could explain his next words.

“I saved you, you know!” he shouted after her, only slurring a bit. “Where’s my gratitude?”

The party jerked to a stop. For a moment, they were still, and Jaime could almost feel the incredulity rise as his words penetrated. Then Daenerys flipped around, pushing her hood off, and her face
was livid. He actually preferred this; anger was easier to deal with that cold dismissal. At least now, she was actually looking at him again.

**Because I’m a pathetic bastard, and the closest thing I’ve had to a friend in years is a little girl.**

“**Saved me?**” she asked, voice shaking.

He simply raised his chin, face twisted in familiar arrogance. A mask long-since perfected.

“When did you **save** me, Jaime? When she **stripped** me?” He didn’t allow himself to flinch. “When she dragged me, **naked**, past you, and I **begged**—” she cut herself off, biting her lip. Her face flushed and she glared at him.

“You think I don’t know my own sister?” he snapped. “You think what she did to you was her **worst**?” His words were mocking—a blatant method to keep his pride from acknowledging that he wanted—wanted—**something**. For her to understand? For her to forgive him? Why? A part of him **hated** that she was the cause of all this, despised her for forcing these nightmares upon him. Had she just left him alone, none of this would have happened. **I wouldn’t miss having someone want me around just for my company.**

“Do you want me to **explain** what could have happened had I—” **Stoked Cersei’s jealousy by helping you.**

He cut himself off, cursing. He couldn’t say that. No one yet understood, as far as he’d heard, just what had set Cersei off. A sister being so jealous of another woman wasn’t **normal**.

“Is that suppose to make this all better?” she asked, and her sneer rivalled his own. “That you **know** what a horrible person she is, and you still—still **chose** her!” Her hand flew up to cover her mouth, eyes wide. She flicked her gaze away, eyes briefly closing in regret.

“**Choise her’?**” he echoed, thrown. Of all the sources of her anger, that one he **hadn’t** expected. “Ah,” he murmured slowly, almost triumphant. “**Is that** what this is?”

He didn’t even understand what he was saying anymore, but the idea that she still **cared** was almost intoxicating. Disdain was one thing, but envy? He felt like a gloating little boy. He wanted to tell her that—that they could go back, that maybe—

But the image of Cersei’s scorn choked him. There was this…this ugliness inside of him that was begging to get out, and the words came out derisive instead of relieved. “**Are you jealous?**”

Justin tried to step forward, mouth open in outrage, but Daenerys halted him with a brutal thrust of her hand. She didn’t turn her eyes from Jaime, and the hurt and embarrassment he saw there was twisting into something worse.

“Jealous of **what**? You’re nothing but a **coward**, Jaime Lannister,” she lashed out, fists clenched. “You always hide behind excuses for why you **didn’t** do something. My father, my mother, my good sister and her children, **your sister**. **All excuses.** Then you try to convince yourself that you were **right**, that you had **no choice**. You use other people for it, too. But there’s no one left who cares to listen, is there? You’re all **alone** now.”

He flinched back that time, remembering Cersei’s accusatory stare. She hated him, and he had nothing left. The ugliness grew. “I **chose** Cersei because she’s **family**. But you wouldn’t understand **that**.”

He regretted it even before the words left his mouth. She gasped and recoiled, her sneer fading until
only pain remained. This time, when Justin surged forward, she didn’t stop him. The next thing Jaime knew, he was on the ground, and blood pooled in his mouth from the blow. He groaned, turning onto his stomach and sitting scarlet ichor onto the path. Justin’s brutal kick to his ribs halted the apology on his tongue.

He began to cough, sick and dizzy from the pain and his hangover. What a pathetic sight he must make.

“Yes,” she said, staring at him, hateful. “Yes, I’m alone, and it’s all because of you. You and your family of murderers.”

She drew herself up, squaring her shoulders, and stared down at him in condemnation. At the moment, she looked every inch the dragon. “You were a waste of time, Jaime Lannister, but at least I managed to get rid of your sister.”

With that, she pulled up her hood and turned away. Justin spat at him, and Jaime shot him a half-hearted glare promising retribution. They headed off into the city, leaving him there to pick himself up. Look at him, the famed kingslayer, taking his bitterness out on a child.

A family of murderers.

Yes, they were—but they were all he had.

*****

I hate him, Jon!

I hate Jaime Lannister. I hate him so much and I wish I had never spoken to him. I wish I hadn’t been curious, or that I could have just stopped talking to him after I found out the truth. I hate him so much. I never even want to think about him again! All the Lannister’s are horrible, terrible people, and from this moment on we will not waste another second on them.

I’m sorry, I don’t want to be so terrible with you, but I needed to tell you, Jon. You told me, once, that Jaime was a man with no honour, and I wish I’d listened then.

Okay, I’m finished. I feel better now. Let’s start this letter properly.

Dear Jon,

There aren’t any prominent Houses of the Reach that maintain a permanent residence in King’s Landing. They’re still not in favour after being on my family’s side of the Rebellion, and my cousin says the king never did forget the fact that Lord Randyll Tarly defeated him in battle. Still, I think things are slowly changing. Cousin’s Stannis’s brother, Lord Renly, has taken lord Loras Tyrell as his squire. Myra says that lord Loras will act as a bridge for the rest of the Reach to begin visiting court. I’ve not spoken to either of them yet, so I don’t know if there is a difference in the way they speak, but lord Loras definitely dresses much more elaborately than any other man I’ve seen. I admit I’m a bit envious; whoever embroidered his clothing is wonderfully talented. Still, after what happened, I’ve grown weary of other highborn; I need more time to collect information.

Plus, my cousin seems to have a very bad opinion of his brother, although he won’t tell me why. I know my cousin no longer cares about impressing the king, which Myra says used to be one of his greatest goals—as stupid as it sounds. Maybe he is still angry that he wasn’t awarded Storm’s End, but I’ve always thought he loved Dragonstone. He only ever spoke of his previous home in
technicalities; like defence, food storage, and sometimes of the siege. There is no real fondness in his tone, unlike when he tells stories of when I was very little. Still, my cousin must have a good reason for his dislike, so I’ll stay away from them for now.

I’m glad your efforts at House Footly were promising! May I tell my cousin about the moss? He’d be able to find alliances here in the capital, I’m sure. It’s come to my attention that I should share with him more, but our letters sometimes seem like a private world, almost a diary, and I don’t want others to know much about them. Does that sound very childish? Don’t tell me if it is!

My journeys into the city have been so informative, Jon. I go three times a week, in the mornings just after the first meal until noon. Don’t worry, I’m being very careful; I keep my hair and eyes covered, and I bring Ser Justin and Ser Redmond with me. It’s shocking to see how little some people have, how hard they have to work every day. Syrio is so helpful, he seems to be able to tell just which people are open to talking, and which should be kept away from. He says that in the end, every city is the same, and you will find the same eyes in the same types of people, no matter where you live. I really like him, Jon; he is so comfortable being exactly who he is, and the way he moves through a crowd, somehow managing to avoid touching anyone, is amazing to watch.

One of the places he’s taken me is a home for parentless children. Many of them lost their fathers in the Rebellion and the Greyjoy uprising. Other were abandoned, many bastard-born. I hate how children are punished for what their parents have done, Jon, it’s disgusting. The septas there say how many of them grow up and fall to ruin because they have no family to support them. Some are lucky and get apprenticeships or jobs, but most end up in the streets or the gallows. I feel so guilty for wishing in the past that I had more, Jon, for still wishing so. Seeing them makes me wonder what my brother Viserys faces in Essos, all alone. Tell me, is collecting the moss a very hard job, Jon? Because I think many of these children, when they grow too old for the home, would welcome a future with us.

Let’s live for the present,

Yours,

Dany

PS: Greet the prince and lord Domeric for me. They must think me very rude to have waited so long.

PPS: Tell the prince that Jaime Lannister is horrible and if he ever has cause to joust him, he should lay him flat into the mud.

Second Moon, 27th day.

*****

Dear Dany,

I don’t know what Jaime Lannister has done, although, considering the context, I suspect. I’ve told the prince of your request, and he said that you’re the first person that’s ever had him consider the benefits of planning. He’s not sure he enjoys the feeling, but you definitely have a comrade in him. I think he’s trying to figure out a way to one day end up opposite Ser Jaime in the lists. Many of the plans involved abduction. He was likely jesting, surely…I sincerely hope he was jesting, Dany.

Domeric greets you in return. I’ve also shown no manners. Please greet Lord Stannis, Lady Myra, Lord Steffon, Tyene, and Ser Justin on my behalf. I agree that these letters, at times, feel like a diary,
as if I’m speaking to myself, and I don’t like to share them. But we should at least keep others informed of certain plans, such as the moss and our efforts to find people to populate our lands. Please tell Lord Stannis to contact my uncle about setting up trade with King’s Landing. As for your idea with the orphans, sometimes you amaze me, Dany. You’re brilliant. They will be so loyal to us for this, as well; we’re giving them something they’ve never had: a home that welcomes them.

I’ve heard little and less of Lord Renly and lord Loras, but I know that Lord Stannis is a fair, intelligent man. Whatever his reasons are for his dislike should be taken seriously. He was fair to me, a bastard, so surely he’s judged his own brother with that degree of impartial thought. They way we’re heading so far makes Highgarden a likely future destination, so I’ll inquire about lord Loras when we arrive.

The father into the Reach we get, the more splendid the view. Colourful flowers, green and gold fields, and trees with fruits I’ve not seen before. The air smells of loam and produce, and we’re passed plentiful villages filled with people. I’m having little luck finding those interested in moving north; life in the Reach is blessed, and the people and animals fat.

We reached House Caswell just five days prior, and your letter came this morning. The House rests on Bitterbridge, which is situated at the meeting point of the Mander river and the Roseroad. I’ve breached the topic of the moss with Lord Caswell, but he’s not a fan of bastards. Though he seems interested in the trade, he’s reluctant about the source. Once again, my birth hinders us. Sometimes, I curse this world; how could my father have willingly brought me into it?

Lord Caswell’s treatment did give me the idea of inquiring after any bastards I find in my journey. If they know they’ll have fair treatment in our keep, surely they’d be open to relocating. You’d be surprised how important respect is—no, I take that back, I think you understand that well. I admit that I’ve considered this idea before, but I wasn’t sure if you’d…tolerate such a thing. I’m ashamed I doubted you, Dany.

We’re headed to Longtable next. There’s also been a word that Lord Fossoway of Cider Hall is holding a tourney during the fifth moon, likely after my Nameday, which is on the fifth day. Oberyn seemed enthused by the idea; he’s been rather bored lately, and I, too, have found the trip since King’s Landing to have grown tedious. At least I have Domeric for company. To keep ourselves entertained, we’ve begun to compete in everything from gathering wood, to building fires, to skinning rabbits. The prince has taken to coming up with increasingly ridiculous tasks for us to complete. Last week we braided grass into a rope and climbed a tall tree to decide who had to cook for the week. I won. One evening we even gambled on the weather, Dany; we’ve surely reached the height of boredom.

Remain well.

Yours,

Jon.

PS: The Reach is crawling with elaborately clothed lords and ladies; very different from the Northerners, who prefer simplicity and practicality. Still, I could ask who designs their garments, if you like.

Third Moon, 12th day.

*****

Stannis sat in his study, reviewing the latest orders of the ore, reading the reports of the navy, and
reviewing the latest missive from Eddard regarding his negotiations with Lord Hugo Wull. Wull was chief of the most powerful mountain clan, and his territory was between the northern mountains and the western coast of the Bay of Ice. Of all the clans, his was the only one that bordered the bay, making his land prime territory for the Iron Island raiders. While the Northerners had decided as a whole to focus on building their fleet and gaining gold though wishing and whaling, House Wull was a rocky terrain with no trees and could contribute little to their effort. The man was displeased with these events, and desired more autonomy over the protection of his lands.

With the help of shrewd Wyman Manderly, who’d taken careful notes of the days spend negotiating, and the positions and motivations of all the lords, Eddard had begun discussions with House Wull regarding a private alliance with Stannis. Seventy percent of the income gained from the ore would be used directly by the House to fund their own construction of castles and defences to augment the eventual fleet, and the remaining profit would be taken as tax by House Stark to be used for construction in the greater North. Furthermore, any other goods found would also be mined and taxed at various rates depending on rarity. Eddard would get his foothold into a Northern mine, Stannis would get his ore—hopefully, the location was rich in it—and the other lords wouldn’t feel slighted by Eddard considering this was a private decision by House Wull.

If all went according to plan, they’d send men into the mountains to look for safe mining grounds by years end, and they should have a functioning mine by mid-year next. The biggest thing they’d struggle to convince Wull on was Stannis’s trustworthiness—both as the man he was, and as a southerner. The clans were even more isolated than the rest of the Houses, making interactions difficult. So far, Eddard had been unsuccessful in negotiating with any of the other mountain lords. The remaining five were located either high up in the mountains or on the eastern side bordering the Wolf’s Wood, and safe from Iron Islanders. Only Wull’s people were at constant risk, and thus their animosity was proving to trump their isolationist nature.

The main problems they were now considering was how to transport the ore to Stannis; by ship, cutting through the Iron Island territory and then circling the continent, or by road—which would involve a massive project of a new horizontal road half-way through continent, which would need to cut through the Wolf’s Wood until it met up with the Kingsroad, which itself would need to be better maintained.

Stannis let out a sharp exhale, and turn to Cressen, who’d been carefully studying the geography of the North, and occasionally muttering about how continent it would be, were they still at Dragonstone with Aegon’s massive table acting as a perfect replica of the continent.

“Even as a smuggler, I’d avoid the sunset sea above Lannisport, sometimes even there, as it was not only a risk of your merchandise, but your life. A road may be costlier in the short run, but it would save you gold in the long-run.” Davos advised, carefully consulting the maps. Stannis turned to him, this smuggler turned confidant, and as always frowned at the mention of his criminal past.

“I would agree, my lord,” Cressen nodded.

Personally, at times Stannis wanted to take the fleet and wage war against the bloody Greyjoy’s and the band of thieves and raiders they commanded. Just wipe the whole island from existence so they’d never again be an issue to Westeros. He already had a siege plan ready, and his brutally pragmatic side sometimes whispered that he could convince war-loving Robert to agree. But most of him protested; instigating the slaughter of a whole people was not only unjust and against their laws, but also morally corrupt. The man capable of leading that assault would need to be much crueler than he; much more willing to sacrifice their soul in exchange.

“Davos, send word to our captains in Essos, tell them to spread the word that we need a man
experienced in the construction of roads. Have him come to me prepared to work in the North.”

“Beg pardon, my lord,” Cressen interrupted. Stannis motioned him to proceed. “I rather think you should allow Lord Stark to agree to such a plan before you put it into action. I’ve gathered that the lords of the north would not be open to allow Essosi so deep into their territory, if they’re already so adverse to the people of their own land.”

Stannis paused, and grudgingly agree that sending a man North so abruptly would likely not endear him to those stubborn lot. “Davos, send word that we’re looking for such a man, but don’t contact any potentials.”

“At once, my Lord,” Davos rose and left the room, going to the rookery to pen and send his message to the Castellan of Dragonstone, Myra’s uncle Lord Morarys Velaryon, who could spread the order to the fleet. They had a temporary man in the rookery at Dragonstone, seeing as Myra insisted that Cressen alone be responsible for the health and education of their family. Stannis wasn’t overly surprised by her insistence; his wife was rightly paranoid of this place and its people. Although she seemed to have a particular animosity for Grand Maester Pycelle, insisting that he’d long broken his vow of neutrality.

Stannis sighed, pushing his papers away tiredly. It was nearly evening meal, and the sun was low outside his small window. He’d been seated there all day, and decided that after dinner he’d spend a few hours sparring with his knights to remain in fit shape. He’d been spending too long immobile lately, now that he had so many added duties. Some days, he contemplated resigning as master of ships, but then he remembered the corrupt state of this city and knew his replacement would likely be amongst their number.

He’d be a rich man if he had a gold dragon for every time he’d held off bribes for information and favours.

“Take the day off on the morrow, my Lord,” Cressen said, gently. “Lady Myra proposed a day spent on the blackwater, enjoying the warmth. It won’t be summer forever.”

“I’ve too much to do, Cressen; with the tax the damned Master of Coin has hefted onto the metal, on top of the payments to the Iron Bank, we’re barely keeping afloat.”

Stannis ground his teeth, imagining the smiling, mild-mannered face of Petyr Baelish. Stannis disliked men who smiled so much; they were either fools or too practised in falsehoods. In exchange for information on the crown's debts, transferring the debt to the Iron Bank to Stannis, alongside a careful summary of any future borrowing from the bank—the man had refused to so for other lenders—Baelish had extracted a twenty percent resource tax from Stannis—an exorbitant rate compared to other metals.

“We must all do our part to support the Crown’s spending, my Lord Baratheon, I myself am an owner of several establishments, and much of their revenue goes directly into the royal coffers. You’ve heard of my success in Gulltown, yes? Well, it takes sacrifice in the present to cultivate a plentiful future.”

Stannis grudgingly acknowledged that the man had proven himself in Gulltown, which still enjoyed prosperity and flowing coffers. Stannis did not have a head for economics—Cressen took care of the bookkeeping for the ore. And he also knew all about Baelish’s brothels, and how his brother was a frequent customer of the ‘high class’ courtesans. Whatever—small—percentage of gold was funnelled into the treasury was likely all being used, and then some, to support Robert’s habits. Now, with the queen gone—good riddance—the king spent basically every night with a whore, often more than one. Disgusting. Stannis had heard a rumor that many of them had to be paid much
more than their usual rate to keep Robert’s newest tendencies at a secret. His brother was a violent drunk and, unfortunately, he was drunk more often than sober.

Ned Stark’s letters to the man had decreased his behaviour, for a time, but Robert was too set in his ways now. Stannis knew, logically, that his behaviour wasn’t all that reprehensible by the standards of most highborn, but the man Stannis was couldn’t abide by such an irresponsible method of ruling. No longer was he a young boy blinded by his elder brother’s charisma and desperate for his approval —Stannis was fully comfortable in his own skin.

Seven Hells, Arryn had even attempted to find the king a mistress, so that least he could cut his spending to one woman, but Robert seemed to be pathologically against monogamy. He still held onto the ghost of a girl he’d barely known but had been placed so high on a pedestal she was no likely amongst the gods for how ardently Robert cherished her memory.

His brother should never have been king. He was a child that threw a tantrum when he didn’t get his way, and placed his own desires above all else.

And his son was a monster.

Jon Arryn had begun to come to Stannis and discuss his woes with Joffrey, who was not only cruel and prone to impulsive, violent tendencies, but also unimaginably spoiled. The boy had neither respect for his elders, loudly proclaiming that “things would be different when he was king!” but despite his intellect, which was satisfactory when calm, his anger drove him to stupidity. The prince had taken to ordering his ‘dog’ to violently punish any servant who in any way displeased him. Stannis could understand lashing out due to his grief for his mother’s fate, but Joffrey’s cruelty was unique amongst his siblings. Arryn was growing increasingly depressed with the lack of progress in trying to shape the boy into a good king, and ideal that Arryn had cultivated from years of watching Robert act exactly opposite.

But Joffrey’s intellect was harmed by his impulsivity, his wisdom by his belligerence, and he had no selfless sense of responsibility to speak of.

“What will I do when he’s king, my lord?” Arryn bemoaned, face old and weathered. “What will we all do? Perhaps...perhaps a wife, a good, strong influence to channel his passions...the boy his young, after all, he will be moulded with time.”

Stannis doubted it and pitied the girl that ended up wed to his nephew.

“I do understand, my lord,” Cressen said, interrupting the thought. “But even the gods need to take a break once in a while.”

Stannis frowned at him; he’d not heard such a strange thing before. “The Seven have no such need, maester.”

Cressen chuckled. “Mayhap, but other gods do, surely. There must be a land in this world that worships rest. Besides, you, my lord, are no immortal. Take a day, as a recommendation from the one who cares for your health.”

Stannis exhaled, conflicted. He’d been working without pause for nearly four months now—no, longer; since the ore meeting. He’d barely spent any time with Myra or the children, besides a few stolen hours while they’d been at Dragonstone. A day spent on the water did sound pleasant.

“And an exhausted husband is no doubt frustrating for his Lady wife, my lord. How could such a man continue to grow his household?”
“Cressen!” Stannis snapped, simultaneously aghast and mortified. The fact that the man was right about how Stannis had been too tired of late to fulfil his husbandly duties, and now realized that Myra had in fact been strangely annoyed at him lately.

Seven hells, maybe he did need a break if he’d gotten to the point of being so tired he was more tempted by sleep than his beautiful wife.

“Apologies, my lord,” Cressen said, much too cheerful. “Simply another matter of health—tension is not good for lords and ladies in their prime.”

Stannis shot him a quelling look, but the man who’d raised him merely hummed as he flipped through a book.

“Alright, I will take the morrow off, now desist. I am still your lord, and this topic is unseemly.” And he didn’t bloody need a reminder to sleep with his wife—he’d have surely recalled his duties soon.

“Of course, my lord,” Cressen murmured, nodding obediently. “And also, do speak to the princess tomorrow as well. Her recent fascination with hawking is worrying on its own in one so young, but for a child who hates violence she is startlingly interested in how much damage their claws could do to a human face.”

“What?”

Seven hells.

*****

Dear Jon,

Is it terrible that I hope the prince isn’t jesting? No matter, I will enjoy the daydream. Dreams are all I have, you see!

My cousin is very unfair. A few days ago, he made it very clear that I could not learn how to hawk, that it was too dangerous or some such nonsense! Hawking is a common pastime in king’s landing for your girls, one of the only acceptable interesting ones! Maester Cressen has betrayed me, Jon; they were only a few inquiries, and anyone would be interested in knowing if they could be used against humans. I promise I’ve had very, very few thoughts about doing so—I simply wanted to know if it was possible. A few of my companions have returned to King’s Landing, and brought along their family birds; they learned at my age!

Well, anyways, I have passed your greetings along to everyone, and they return them in turn. I’ve yet to tell my cousin about the moss; he seems so busy that I think I’ll wait until he has less work. Besides, we should focus on finding enough hands to harvest because until then, trade is a moot point anyway. I know the crannogmen and Lord Reed offered their help, but they’ve already done so much, and I don’t want to be a burden on them. This is our land, Jon, and we must solve these problems ourselves. We are brilliant, after all (you make me smile, Jon).

The Reach sounds like a magical place! I’ve only ever known the city and Dragonstone, and neither have fields—both rely on the Reach for their food, and much of it already dry. And another tourney! Will you be joining, Jon? I know the prince will be in the joust, and perhaps lord Domeric will as well—or in the melee. But the archery competition is perfect for boys your age (so says my cousin). I can’t wait to read about it.

The septas I’ve spoken to at the orphanage were difficult to convince to trust me, and I had to show them who I was and that I did, in fact, have a place for their charges. They have promised to keep
silent and to make inquiries amongst the eldest children, those nearly too old to stay, about heading North for work. All children, Jon, bastard or not. As you said, they will give us their loyalty for a welcoming place. Also, we do not need Lord Caswell’s business, Jon! Let him be the only lord that must purchase wood.

Your parents brought you into this world for me, Jon. Lord Stark has done me a great boon. Imagine how lonely I would be right now without you, perhaps betrothed to some spoiled, boring lording—or maybe even disgusting Joffrey! What a cruel fate that you saved me from. So, you see, you were born for me. I am selfish, I know, but I am also always right.

Write me soon.

Yours,

Dany.

Third Moon, 23rd day

*****

“Are you ill, broody boy?”

Jon immediately ducked his head, hunching his shoulders. It was late into the night, and Oberyn had seen him rush out of the room he shared with Domeric; he knew Jon opened the letters before bed, and then read and responded the following day. A curious little ritual. His squire was now trying very hard to appear as if he hadn’t been crying. Jon cleared his throat a few times, discreetly wiping his eyes. Oberyn noticed, however, and eyes the letter his squire kept clutched.

“Bad news?” he murmured, quiet. Gods, that girl never caught a break, if so. Oberyn was tempted to ride back to the shit city and kidnap her. They could pin up her hair—his daughters had taught him, coolly, that cutting it was not happening—dress her in baggy, dark clothes, and take her with them. He was already collecting a slew of pretty boys, and he was enjoying the reputations he was getting in response—but just how much of a reprobate did these people think he was?—and one more would only make it all the more entertaining. And then he could send Baratheon a letter after giving the man a few weeks to panic.

“No,” Jon whispered, clearing his voice of hoarseness. “No.”

“Ah,” Oberyn murmured, and turned to lean back against the window his squire was staring through, keeping quiet as the boy collected himself. Good news, then? Ah, what an interesting pair—I should really steal those letters one day. He knew he wouldn’t.

Oberyn eyed his squire; Jon’s had begun to fill, hinting at a lean, muscled physique, and he’d grown almost half a head since they’d met. His dark hair had grown as well, hanging to his shoulders and frequently in his face when not pushed behind one ear. Oberyn didn’t much concern himself over small matters like cutting it, but no facial hair was yet present. He wasn’t exaggerating about the boy’s look, either—Jon was pretty and would likely be more beautiful than handsome when he fully grew. Ned Stark was rather plain, although attractive in a gruff, Northern way, so Jon’s looks must definitely be from his mother. Oberyn didn’t remember Ashara well, and hadn’t seen the Daynes in years, but surely the familiarity Oberyn noticed was from them. Arthur had been more than attractive, although he’d always been stern-faced and with a sharper jaw. Well, anyway, the boy needed that boost in confidence, all things considered, and his looks would definitely help him stand beside a dragon. Even the plainest Targaryen was beautiful.
Had Rhaegar not been such a moody shit, Oberyn would have enjoyed him immensely. Elia surely would have allowed her most beloved brother to sample her husband at least once. She’d not had much use for him, after all. Oberyn chuckled, his heart a mix of amusement and agony.

His every memory of her was stained, and he’d not find peace until he avenged her.

And for that reason, the Targaryen would stay where she was, and his brief flashes of showing her Westeros would only ever be a dream.

“You love your—lady Ellaria?” Jon asked—a strange mix of question and statement, as if he were undecided about the proper tone.

“I do,” Oberyn said; that, he’d never doubted.

Jon shook his head, furrowing his brows. “But—in every House and—and in some villages—” Jon exhaled sharply, curing under his breath, and met Oberyn’s eyes directly. “You are not faithful to her. That’s not love.”

It was almost an accusation—the confused quest of a boy on the brink of manhood, who’d only just started understanding himself. Obeyrn smiled. He leaned back, tilting his head until he could see the sky turned on its head, but no less magnificent. The Moonmaid—the constellation that begs lovers to revel under her light in the dark—shone brightly.

“I have wandered all my life—since birth, I was always looking towards the stars, insatiable for what was out there. I left home as soon as I could, saw the world—most live and die in their small corner, and what a pity that is. I have loved many, many bodies, fathered more children than I likely know, and always left. The sky called to me, broody boy—always.”

Jon listened carefully, eyes as serious as the day they’d met. This was no a child that took lessons lightly, although he was no saint—a bit spoil, angry, sometimes melancholy, and hid from his own ambition. Insecure of himself and his own worth, although that scar was healing, slowly. Still, a child Oberyn had grown to care for more than he’d thought possible—the dark humour, the stubbornness, the dedication to his word, and the desire to be good. The absolute comfort he showed in Oberyn’s presence, not even fearing to accuse him of infidelity, with the quiet demand that he stop and respect his lover.

“And now?” Jon prompted. “It doesn’t anymore? Call you?”

“Ah, no, the call is there—it will be always. The world is too large, too splendid, to spend idle. But now I am pulled to her, as well—more so. She is stability—a place I fit. No matter how we wander or the pleasures we enjoy, eventually we all return home. That is my love.”

“Home,” Jon echoed, a mix of doubt and longing. “I’ve never…had that,” he whispered, old bitterness mixed with new hope.

And now? But Oberyn didn’t ask—he knew the answer.

“I’ll make Moat Cailin into the greatest castle in these kingdoms,” Jon said, meeting Oberyn gaze in challenge. “It’ll be a home for anyone who needs one. We’ll be—we’ll be happy.”

Oberyn smiled and placed his hand atop the boy’s head, fondly mussing the waves. In this darkness, his hair was the night and his eyes the stars—burning with their endless light. Oberyn had no doubt this boy would succeed.

*****
Dear Dany,

Thank you. Just, thank you. (It’s only fair that I make you smile, considering what you do to me). You’re right, it’s our land, and our responsibility. A home. With many small animals perfect for a hawk’s diet.

I’ve had some success seeking workers for our home, now that I’m looking for those unwanted by any others. Highborn and lowborn, both are interested—they were mistrustful at first, but it seems my own status is good for something.

We’re at Longtable—seat of House Merryweather. Once again, your letter arrived days after we did. Lord Merryweather was shown the greatest interest in our moss so far. They were once rich, powerful House, but certain events saw their status and wealth fall. They’re seeking new ways to reclaim it, and the moss would significantly cut down on what they spend to import wood. The Reach is full of fruit trees, fields, and grasslands—none of which could be used for fuel, and they cannot waste farmland to plant forests. Lord Merryweather also has a rather large collection of bastard children in his lands, and was open to the idea of sending them North. But I don’t wish to force anyone, Dany, and made that clear. Orphans or bastards, they’ll be welcome if they want to come for honest work.

I’ll join the archery competition at the tourney. The prince had us make arrows every month, and practice every morning for an hour. Then we spar with swords, spears, and staffs. I still prefer the sword, but I am good at them all. I want to win, Dany.

I try not be selfish, I’ve always thought it’s not my place. But I’ll tell you a secret, Dany I am selfish; there’s so much I want. You were born for me as well, Dany. It’s only fair.

Yours,
Jon.

Fourth Moon, 9th day

Chapter End Notes

So, I’ve finally added dates to the letters (I'll get to the previous ones....eventually). Every 2 letters span about a month, and this is the time skim I was talking about. This chapter spanned 3 months. The way this works is:

1. Jon tells Dany where he’s going next, and it takes them about 10 days of leisure travel to get there.
2. She plans for this, and then sends her letter to the next place she knows they’d have arrived (Cressen helps).
3. Oberyn stays at each House about 2 weeks, and her letter arrives halfway through this time.
4. Jon responds the next day with his destination (or telling her they're staying put) and they're off by the time the raven reaches Dany.

I've avoided giving dates for so long cause I have no idea how GRRM's calendar works, or what he names his weekdays or months. So, here, one month is a 'Moon' after the lunar cycle. The end of their month is the new moon, and their moon cycle is longer than our 28 days (30ish). Some people theorize that their months are actually a lot longer.
which accounts for how old characters seem, but I'm sticking to the normal 30ish days, 12 months, simply cause it's easier to keep track of. Let's just say these 'humans' are neurologically different than we are to explain any mental advancements.

Also, I looked up King's Landing, but Flea Bottom is the only district that's named, so I'm calling the upper-middle class 'uptown' since it's near the bottom of Aegon's Hill.

I'll get to the comments soon, I'm so sorry for the delay, I've been so busy!

I swear I'm forgetting something.....
Well, it'll come to me eventually.

Enjoy! :D
Chapter Notes

No new excuses this time, just the same old: school.

This chapter is dedicated to reparations_only, my faithful servant who is helping me collect new souls! :D

Also, MariDark, author of The Court of Bastard, won’t be able to update this week due to health reason. Feel better soon Mari! :)

Sometimes, Dany knew what the dreams meant. Or at least, she could sense what they would bring—dread, pain, challenge. A fragile bud of hope. She wished she could pretend they were born of madness, inflicted by her blood; it might have made it easier.

After all, nothing had come true.

Yet.

But this dream wasn’t a story yet to come, it was a tale long dead…yet somehow alive? A warning of a past that could be a future. So, when the torches on the jewel-encrusted cavern wall lit, chasing away the darkness to reveal a massive, underground mausoleum, she walked down the onyx path without protest. The dream wouldn’t end until she learned. Time meant nothing here.

On either side of her loomed tall, bejeweled chests, engraved with the marks of their age. The very first one dwarfed her tiny body. But the further she walked, the smaller they became—they only needed to be big enough to contain the history within.

The last one could fit in the palm of her hand.

There should be another.

She reached out her hand with only a small hesitation. The lid was so cold it burned her fingertip. It bled with the echo of love and hate; of longing and sorrow.

Inside were two fallen Cyvasse kings, and between them stood a looming dragon. Its burning eyes stared up at her. The dragon’s chest was hollow.

It had gouged out its own heart.

“The game ends when you kill the king.”

She woke up sobbing. For the first time, she couldn’t remember why.

*****

Dear Jon,

Be selfish. It’s only fair.
Also, good luck in the tourney! Some knights from the crownlands have also gone to participate and win renown. You’ll see them soon. Good fortune to you all.

I’ve been spending time with the children in the orphanage at Flea Bottom. It’s taking time to get them to warm up to me, and so Ser Davos recommended I bring sweets during my next visit. Many of them are wary of me, especially the older boys, so hopefully, it works. They don’t like the idea of leaving the city; the North is so alien to them, and some seem to prefer a life they know, even if it is a poor one. I am trying to think of ways to convince them.

King’s Landing is so much better now, Jon! My companions have returned, and now with the old queen gone and the king barely around, more people have begun to speak with me. Now when I walk down the halls, I feel as if I can breathe easier. I still have to avoid the Joffrey, of course, but his days are much busier now under Lord Arryn’s watch. It serves him right!

Ser Jaime has been making life difficult for the Kingsguard, however. He is frequently drunk now. I never realized before that he has no companions. Is it strange that I feel sorrow for him, yet am still angry? Well, maybe not angry...but definitely annoyed!

You see, he told me that his inaction during the incident saved me from a worse fate, and I haven’t been able to get the words out of my head. You have siblings, Jon, tell me what you think. I have never met my brother, but I suppose if he took the side of some girl I hated over mine I would be angry as well. Not to the extent of Cersei Lannister, of course, but she is not a regular woman. Jaime’s inaction is understandable, then, is it not?

I’m so confused, Jon! Part of me wants to forgive him, but the rest of me hates the idea. He has never even apologized, and knowing him, he never will! He wears his pride like armor and would sooner drink himself to the grave than relinquish it. Still, he has been so pathetic these past moons that I am reluctantly pitying him. What do you think I should do?

Yours,

Daenerys.

Fourth Moon, 28th day

*****

Sometime during their journey to Cider Hall, Jon Snow’s eleventh Nameday passed. He didn’t tell either of his companions of the event, and the day went by leisurely amidst blue skies, fragrant fields, and a night in a small village inn. He’d laid awake watching the waning moon and thought about the sheer unpredictability of life; one year ago, he’d been tracing after Oberyn through the harsh North, not even contemplating telling the man about his Nameday. All the years before that he’d spent the somber day in Winterfell’s grey walls.

Growing older had never been a cause for celebration.

Every year on that day, his father would get especially grim and unusually short-tempered, and Winterfell and the family were correspondingly steeped in gloom. Jon had grown to believe that his father felt the shame of bringing a bastard into the world much of poignantly during that day. Of course, Lord Stark tried to hide the melancholy, and gave Jon a gift as he did for all of his children--but Jon always sensed the heaviness of Ned’s mood. His Nameday was a farce; his father wasn’t pleased nor proud, and he could never hide it from Jon.

The gift he received always evoked bitterness, and then shame for that bitterness.
Only Robb tried his best to ignore the atmosphere and cheerfully greeted Jon. His brother always planned something special—an extra sweet at dinner, a new bridle, a ride alone in the wolf’s wood.

“It’s the day I got a brother, Jon.”

When he’d turned six, and the boys had begun to understand just what Jon was, Robb hadn’t turned on him—despite Lady Catelyn’s disapproval. Jon had cried that day, under the protection of the Weirwood, and Robb had simply sat against his back patiently. Jon had eaten every bit of the cake Robb had gotten him—it was still the best thing he’d ever tasted. His brother was the only one who made Jon feel like his birth was a cause for celebration, and he’d missed Robb especially these past two.

Thus, he’d told neither Domeric nor Oberyn of the event for two simple reasons; he still felt the weight of his Father’s sorrow, even from so far away, and he didn’t want to celebrate without Robb.

The only person he had told, in a fit of stupid hope, had been Daenerys—moons ago in a letter. But she hadn’t mentioned it, and he’d pushed down the humiliating hurt and reminded himself that he shouldn’t start expecting more than he already had. Dany had already given him things the eight-year-old Jon Snow could only dream of—remembering his Nameday was unnecessary. The lack of mention even in her latest letter, which he’d received nearly a week before—and had yet to respond to, to his shame—shouldn’t fill him with such gloom. But perhaps he needed the reminder that in the end, this marriage would still be a contract between them. The thanked the gods that he hadn’t signed his last letter using that word.

Although I’m starting to hate Jaime fucking Lannister. No matter what Daenerys said, Jon could sense that she cared for the knight. She’d spent a lot of time talking about him—and not mentioning my Name—ugh, no, Others take me!—and he knew that she wanted a solution from Jon, some push to validate her desire to forgive the other man.

The only problem was, Jon didn’t want to give it to her. When she’d first told him about their separation, he’d been angry on her behalf but also…relieved.

“You don’t understand how selfish I can be, Dany,” he murmured under his breath, only a bit guilty.

He’d always wanted too much, always wanted more. He didn’t even know Daenerys and yet…

He pushed the thoughts away, cursing. Clenching his hand too tightly over the nock, drew the sting back, and took careful aim. He exhaled, held his breath for a beat, and loosed the arrow. It flew straight and embedded itself deeply into the target. He lowered his arms and cursed again, scowling at how far from center he’d hit. All morning his shots had been shit.

He was acting like a petulant child, dejected because a girl he didn’t know had forgotten his Nameday and instead focused on another. He’d only mentioned it in passing! He knew it was an easy thing to overlook.

And unlike Jon, Jaime Lannister had known Daenerys for years. It was natural that she cared for the man more than…Jon shook his head, frown deepening.

“Snap out of it, Others take you,” he muttered, bending to grab another arrow from the pile at his feet—another bunch he and Domeric had crafted. He slid the arrow into place, took his stance, drew, exhaled…and loosed. The arrow flew straight through the air, it’s speed perfect, it’s arch resisting the weak wind. But once again it hit the target too far from the center! Such a score wouldn’t win him anything, let along a tourney that was drawing knights from all over the continent!
Jon exhaled in resignation, closing his eyes. He’d always been too emotional, and now it was getting in the way.

“Thank the gods I didn’t write that word.” He could only imagine the polite way she may brush it off, or maybe not even mention it—which would either make it better or worse.

He shook his head, dejected, and bent to get another arrow. Always wanting too much. He was a proper bastard, if nothing else. He took his stance again, trying to ignore the external noise and the internal conflict, to just get lost in the motions.

They’d arrived at House Fossoway of Cider Hall a just over a fortnight past, and the tourney was set at for moon’s end. Already, the Keep and nearby village were brimming with knights and squires from all over the realm. Jon would join the archery contest, Oberyn the joust, and Domeric the joust and melee. Jon was currently in the courtyard, standing before one in a large row of targets and surrounded by boys his own age. The yard clattered with the sound of arrows finding their targets, with exclamations of success or groans of failure. A gaggle of men and women watched the proceedings from the shade of the castle overhang, chatting amongst themselves. A quick sweep of his competition told Jon that while his current performance was on par with many, he was in no way the best.

Jon exhaled, frustrated as he loosed another arrow, and once again it missed its mark. He was better than this!

“She owes you nothing, you fool.” So what if he read her letters over and over again, to the point that he’d all but memorized the words? He shouldn’t expect such a thing from her—she’d already given him so much just by existing! Gods but he felt pathetic.

You have a duty to her, Jon Snow, and she to you. Your marriage with her will be amiable—more than you’d ever hoped. Enough with the greed.

Draw, exhale, loose.

Miss.

He shook his head and decided to stop here—he was simply too wound up today, and none of his self-chastising was working. He needed time, is all—the hurt her letter evoked were too new. These feelings would fade in a few days, plenty of time before the tourney, and then he’d be back at his best. He’d gotten much too used to gratification—this was a good lesson.

He gathered up his things and made his way over to the armory, which was adjacent to the yard, to deposit the bow. He nodded at a few others who were entering and exiting with various weapons, then made his way towards the guest hall. Domeric was likely in the other yard practicing the sword, and Oberyn had disappeared with his horse early in the morning. Jon decided he needed a few hours away from people to brood in peace.

It was times like this he missed the weirwoods of the North. Jon hadn’t felt true serenity since he’d boarded the ship to Braavos. The southerners and their Faith of the Seven had long since cut or burned down the eyes of old gods.

Dejected, he returned to his small room at the house and spent a couple hours in solitude. He used some of the time to polish Dark Sister, having neglected it since they’d arrived. After finishing the sword, he stepped to the window and admired the fierce beauty of Valyrian Steel. Then he held it vertically in front of him, measuring its length.
He was still too short to properly wield the longsword—the pommel reached his cheek when it should reach his armpit—despite the recent growth he’d undergone. He rubbed his tired arms, noting how much fuller they were now than when he’d met Oberyn. Life with the prince may be unpredictable, but not in terms of when they ate, how much they ate, and how frequently they trained. The road was rather boring overall, and Oberyn’s casual pace usually doubled and often tripled a journey, so he and Domeric had countless hours of time, which they spent sparring, racing, or competing. The amount he’d trained in Winterfell couldn’t compete with how much he currently did, and his developing physique proved him. Jon had gained quite a bit of muscle, and his arms were defined in a way they’d not been at home. He wondered if Robb would be impressed.

He placed Dark Sister back in its sheath and wrapped it up, then pushed it back under the bed. Then Jon just stood there—what now? He was certainly calmer, so perhaps some more time in the field—he was in no mood to seek out the Maester for lessons.

His mind flashed back to the sailor he’d met in Braavos. Xhobar of the Summer Isles. He also remembered the bow Xhobar had shown him, whose string he’d been too weak to pull. And the strange archery stance he’d taken—hand to cheek rather than the chin, hips a bit farther apart, feet slightly splayed, and nock held between his first two fingers rather than his thumb and index. Jon had a pretty good memory and now found himself curious about what differences those small changes could make. The Summer Isles weren’t famed for their archery for nothing, after all—maybe it would give him an edge.

“I can’t get any worse,” he signed, stepping out of the room and locking it.

“A rather bleak outlook, but then you have been particularly moody this day.”

Jon looked up to see Domeric approaching, his long hair wet against his tunic. Jon guessed he was returning from the bathing room; the older boy was rather meticulous about cleanliness. Domeric always washed thoroughly after sparring and made Jon do so as well, stating how he hated the feeling and smell of sweat. Dom had also read a book on how to make soap while at House Buckwell, and his boredom had driven him to experiment with different plants he collected during their journey. Oberyn found Domeric’s interest particularly useful, as the prince had rather decadent tastes in perfumes. It was apparently easier to seduce women when one didn’t smell like horseshit. For his part, Jon supposed he was grateful he didn’t have to spend days with terribly smelling companions—he remembered the lack of hygiene at Castle Black all too well.

He just hoped the plants in Dorne were not so sickeningly sweet, like in the Reach. Domeric cared not at all about the opinions of others, but Jon didn’t appreciate smelling like a menagerie of fruit.

“I’m moody every day, according to the prince.”

Domeric’s smile was faint. “Yes, well, Oberyn Martell tends to describe any emotion besides pleasure as ‘moody’. I’m rather looking forward to meeting his children and paramour. It will finally answer my question; are the Dornish all like him, or is he unique?”

“Don’t tell him if you find it to be the former,” Jon chuckled, “He’d have a fit and do something outrageous to prove his originality.”

Domeric laughed quietly, his eyes lighting with a rare show of true emotion.

“A servant found me to say there’s a new letter from Winterfell,” Domeric said casually, and Jon tensed. “I was on my way to burn it.”

Jon’s good humor evaporated. “Do we have to keep doing this?”
“I am a dutiful son,” the older boy murmured, moon-pale eyes serene, and as one they turned left on the way to the rookery. “My father gave me strict instructions, and I follow them.”

“Yes,” Jon said, dry. “He told you to drive a wedge between me and my family. I doubt he expected you to tell me that.”

Dumeric hummed in agreement. “He didn’t say not to.”

“You know, my first impression of you was completely wrong,” Jon noted, remembering those hours they’d spent riding horses. Dumeric had seemed open and honest, playful even. A normal boy of fifteen. But then, that’s how he seemed with any new person they met.

“First impressions are important,” Dumeric noted. “They stick with people—you can make yourself seem relatable, non-threatening, perhaps even a tad simple. A harmless ‘friend’—it certainly made you more open to speak with me, didn’t it?”

“You let go of your act rather quickly—after Harrenhal. Got tired of making me doubt my father?”

“I found there’s no need to. Besides, I have leverage now,” he responded simply, and Jon glared. Damn him and Oberyn both.

“Sometimes I wonder if this is a manipulation itself—showing me your apparently ‘real’ face.”

Dumeric looked at him, smiling faintly. “How is this a manipulation, then?”

He knew the answer—but he enjoyed these moments between them. Jon found he rather did as well—Dumeric Bolton was….interesting. His views were always logical, although twisted by a lack of sentiment. He was likely one of the most dangerous people Jon had ever met. Such a skilled liar that Jon sometimes wondered if either of his sides was even real—or if there was another person under both that revealed the true Dumeric Bolton.

They passed by a group of knights, and Jon nodded at them. Dumeric gave a charming grin—he likely knew them all by name. It faded as soon as they passed.

“You show me this person you are underneath—or at least who you say you are—tell me you were told to destroy my relationship with Winterfell, and openly act as that other boy while I’m still around—showing how good a liar you are. It makes me feel special to be trusted so much, Dom. Almost as if we share a side—and that’s the point, isn’t it? To gain loyalty.”

Dumeric looked down at Jon, and again there was that true amusement in his eyes. “That right there is why I bother, Jon Snow. You’re much too interesting. I planned to follow my father’s orders, of course, until I realized he had too little information about this situation. His assessment was inaccurate.”

“And what did lord Bolton see me as?” Jon tried to be casual, but he’d actually been burning with curiosity since that day on the hill.

“Angry. Cruel. Impulsive—filled with desire. Not a lie—my father is perceptive.”

Jon scowled, but resolutely continued walking.

“He is impulsive, however—arrogant in his judgements. He missed the loyalty, kindness, dedication. His plan would have failed—you’ll never stop wanting your family’s love and will never harm them. You’re…’good’.” He said the word as if it were foreign and not all together pleasant. “And you’d have never joined his side, not using those methods…if your family hurt you, Jon, you’d retreat and
disappear rather than lash out. And regardless, you’d never trust him—I’m not sure you trust anyone, truthfully.” I do—few. “Tell me, is this Oberyn’s influence, or have you always been like this?”

Both.

“I certainty don’t trust you,” Jon snapped. He hated how perceptive Domeric was. Like Jon was just another one of his books.

Domeric shrugged. “Doesn’t matter; you accept me as I am—and I, you. A rare friendship. Rather freeing.”

Jon hated that he was right—which is why he wondered if he was being manipulated. “You’d take your father’s side, wouldn’t you? If it came down to it.”

“I am a Bolton,” he responded, not a hint of hesitance or conflict. “The real question is, whose side would you take—your old family…or the one you’re to have? If it came down to it. Our goals could align in the future—and allies are necessary.”

Jon clenched his teeth, exhaling. Sometimes he wished Domeric was simply that boy he’d first met—but then Jon would have to always be the boy he was supposed to be. He didn’t know if dealing with this Domeric was more tiering, or if acting like that Jon would be.

“I’ll never take Winterfell—no matter what scheme your father has.”

But they both knew he wanted it. As a young boy, before he’d understood what a bastard was, Jon Snow had dreamt of Winterfell one day being his own. Of sitting where his father sat, of men loyal to him, of respect. Of a wife to love him and his children like Lady Catelyn loved Ned and his siblings. He’d grown ashamed of that desire—but it existed still. Jon wanted to be legitimate.

One late night, he’d confessed as much to Domeric Bolton, knowing he wouldn’t react with scorn like many others would. Because the older boy was different than any person Jon had ever met. Domeric didn’t feel things like others did, his emotions were…muted, and he didn’t truly care about honor and morality. Jon thought he’d hate such a person, the antithesis of all he aspired to be, and yet…Jon Snow was a boy who took others as they were. It made it all the easier because Domeric also didn’t care about what others thought or said. Bastard, highborn, lowborn—titles were only relevant so far as how each one impacted how Domeric must act. As far as the older boy was concerned, only his own opinion mattered. Domeric often didn’t understand why others did what they did or cared about certain things—he only understand emotions on an intellectual level, and mimicked it as appropriate.

Thus, Jon could tell him anything, no matter how shocking, and Domeric wouldn’t judge him for it. It was…freeing. And likely a complicated tactic meant to win Jon’s trust.

“You care nothing for history nor blood, yet you preach about family,” Jon lashed out, frustrated.

Domeric blinked at him. For a long moment, he was silent, and Jon could feel him deliberating as they walked. Finally, Domeric paused and Jon stopped as tell, turning to face the other boy. Domeric’s gaze was vague, as if he wasn’t really seeing him—he got that way when thinking deeply. “I understand what it is to be alone. I grew amongst people who’ve never really understood me—and I learned to lie. To pretend to be like them. I can’t tell them that I don’t care about their lives, that I wouldn’t miss them should they die, that I wouldn’t hesitate to fell them in battle. I can’t tell them that gods and spirits and traditions mean nothing to me—that history is an amusing story, but ultimately irrelevant. I don’t know why the will of the long-dead should dictate how I act.”
Jon met his gaze. He couldn’t say he understood Domeric completely—Jon cared about all the things Domeric professed not to and couldn’t comprehend how the older boy felt nothing. But Jon could understand the isolation of never belonging—of learning to act in ways that others found acceptable.

“I feel,” Domeric noted, but it was like he was speaking to himself, brows faintly furrowed as if he were evaluating the taste of the words on his tongue. “I feel,” he nodded, “but not like others do, I know. But I share a universal trait: I don’t wish to be alone. I don’t want to spend my life pretending; I want someone who understands me. Only those of my blood do—my father does…perhaps my brother will as well. Not love, certainly, but enough.” He focused on Jon. “You do too, in a way. I care nothing for honor and morality and what I should do—I’ll take the side of those who understand me.”

And then Jon’s own words whispered in his mind. *I try not be selfish, I’ve always thought it’s not my place. But I’ll tell you a secret Dany; I am selfish—there’s so much I want. You were born for me as well.*

He’d been drawn to her because she understood scorn and isolation, because she’d stepped into his loneliness and declared they’d share that space. Jon thought—hoped—that they were alike.

Jon flipped around and marched away, listening to Domeric’s steps as he followed. “See, this is why I don’t trust you,” Jon muttered. “I have no idea if any of those words were true.”

Domeric smiled, and it reached his eyes. “If we ever meet on opposites sides, Jon, don’t hesitate. I won’t.”

urtles take you. Maybe that was the real point of all this—and what made Domeric so dangerous.

They made their way to the rookery in silence, and Jon found a letter from his father, Robb, and Sansa wishing him a pleasant Nameday. Sansa’s short missive was a surprise, but a welcome one. He’d heard that Lady Catelyn had returned to Winterfell, and the news had evoked mixed feelings. He was glad for his siblings; whatever the Lady had been like to Jon, she loved her children fiercely—she’d was the reason he’d dreamed of a mother. However, part of him couldn’t forgive her for what she’d done to him—although he understood.

But this latter from Sansa spoke of change in Winterfell. Perhaps when he returned, he’d be met with welcome from them all. But he’d love them all regardless. No, nothing would ever get him to betray his family—it wasn’t in Jon.

“You’re more perceptive that your father, Domeric. You’ll either be the best or worst lord the Dreadfort has ever seen.”

“Depends on one’s allegiance.”

With a sigh, Jon shook his head. “Come on, then. I’ve a stance I want to try on the field.” Their conversation and the letters had calmed him down enough to allow him to concentrate this time.

They made they way back towards the courtyard, and Jon told Domeric all about Xhobar of the Summer Isles, and the queer stance the man used. He was explaining all the differences, mostly to remind himself, as they made their way into the sunshine and towards the armory.

“Aa, there he is, Ser—in the grey tunic.”

They both glanced up. A young male servant was walking towards them, leading an older man in aged but well-preserved armor. The knight, presumably, was heavily bearded, black of hair, and
graced with a large nose and small eyes. At his side he carried a sword, the pommel of which was undecorated, and a bow sheathed in a leather holster at his back. Jon looked him up and down but saw no House sigil—a hedge knight? They were named so because many were so poor they couldn’t afford housing, and had to sleep in the hedges that grew wild in Westeros.

“Yer Jon Snow, boy?” the man asked, accent reminiscent of those he’d heard in King’s Landing. The man looked him up and down, his interested blatant.

“I am. You have business with me, Ser…?”

“Amrey; I’ve come from the crownlands—for the tourney,” he informed them. Then Ser Amrey reached for the leather loop over his large shoulder and unwound the sheathed bow from his back. He held the whole thing out to Jon expectantly.

Jon only stared at the supple brown leather before him, bemused.

“Well, take it already, kid. I’ve been ridin’ me horse for two bloody weeks straight, and my ass is sores as the seven hells. Been looking for you for hours, boy, and I’ve gotta piss something awful!”

Jon blinked and took the bow, meeting Domeric’s raised brow with a confused frown. He ran his fingers over the leather, feeling the butter-smooth quality—the whole thing was encased, and a leather tie kept the long side closed. As soon as it was in his hands, the knight turned and began to walk towards the village, his legs shaking as if to prove his words about his journey.

“Wait!” Jon called, walking after him. “I don’t understand—who is this from?”

The man looked over his shoulder, irritated. “Some lord from King’s Landing. Gave me silver and told me to give this to Jon Snow. I was comin’ here anyway, so…” he shrugged, then turned back around. “There’s a missive inside, probably!” he raised his arm without looking back, made his way to the gate, and was gone.

Jon’s heart began to beat. There was only one Lord in King’s Landing that would have any interest in Jon.

Carefully, he untied the sheath and reached inside. He felt the metal covering the polished wood long before he drew the recurve bow out into the light. A letter fell out, and Domeric snatched it out of the air before it could hit the mud. They huddled close together and studied the piece, and Jon’s breath left him. It’s upper and lower limbs were carved from rick oak and lacquered to shine. The Stark sigil was carved onto the top limb, and the three-headed Targaryen dragon into the bottom one. He traced his fingers over them, chest squeezing tightly. The grip, nocking point, and limb tips were made of a shining metal, and intricate designs were engraved onto the grip—yet the bow was so light! Not a light as pure wood, but lighter than any metal-engraved one Jon had ever lifted. While it was for a fully-grown man’s hands, he had no trouble lifting it. The bottom limb went down to his knee.

Nearly breathless, Jon got into his stance and gripped the nock. It was definitely more difficult to pull than the bows he was used to, but he managed to wrench the string all the way back with only a slight tremble. Oberyn’s demonic weight lifting had increased exponentially these past two moons, and Jon now he silently apologized for dreaming of burring him in rocks. The bow fit perfectly in his hands, and the arrow rest and sight window matched his dominant eye and hand. He released the string and it snapped back with a sharp twang. Had it been loaded; the arrow would have flown true.

Domeric held out the letter, and opened his other palm in silent bid to try the weapon himself. With only a slight hesitation, Jon handed it over, watching as Domeric weighted it in one hand, then took his own stance. He looked down at the letter, opening it as he registered another twang rend the air.
Dear Jon,

Surprise! When you told me of your Nameday, I knew I wanted to gift you with something special. It was only until you told me of the tourney that I got an idea for a bow. I wrote to Lord Stark who agreed that this would be a wonderful present, and purchased it from cousin Stannis. Tobho Mott fashioned this bow especially for you. I hope it arrives in time for the tourney—although my cousin did tell me you may be too young to use it. I tried pulling the string, and it wouldn’t budge, but you’ll be a man soon, Jon, and will surely be able to. Also...well, you see, I wrote to Prince Oberyn a while ago and told him about it, and he said he’d make sure to have you ready. I’m sorry if it hurt.

It’s made of oak wood and aluminum. Tobho Mott has been experimenting with the design, and says that it’s more durable than wood and thus able to take on more weight without breaking. My cousin has told me the arrows will fly farther and faster that way. It’s not cheating, I’ve checked. Also, I’m told the Dornish favor recurve bows like this one, so when you get there they’ll surely teach you all sorts of interesting things. My cousin said it’s a good business opportunity. He’s gained a new appreciation for tourneys. Oh, and Mott would appreciate it if you’d send him updates on how it holds up. He lives at Dragonstone.

I hope you win. Happy Nameday Jon.

Yours,

Dany.

Fifth Moon, 5th Day

“Gods,” he whispered, shaken. His mouth was so dry, the words were a rasp. “Gods.”

“So, it is from your princess,” Domeric remarked, still studying the weapon. “Really, I should take lessons from her—she’s managed to bind you so tightly without even having met you. She’ll be formidable one day. All the more reason to remain allies.”

Jon gave a startled laugh, but Domeric only blinked. Jon realized after a moment that he’d been completely serious.

*****

Dear Dany,

Sometimes I’m sure this is all a dream, and you’re something I made up. Any moment I’ll wake up in my bed at Winterfell, to learn that the real Daenerys Targaryen is not half as magnificent.

The bow is perfect, Dany. Thank you.

I wish I had left you the pin with Syrio. I wish I had thought to get you something. I’ll make it up to you, I vow it.

I’m looking forward to learning how it went with the children. Ser Davos is smart; sweets are the way to even the stubbornest heart. On my side, I’m having increased success—bastards and lowborn, and even a few of third and fourth sons with no interest in other the Wall, citadel, Essos, or a life as hedge knights. I expect uncle Benjen will be receiving a few of them by years end. I’m glad that King’s Landing has changed for the better—although how I’ll top Lord Stannis’s Nameday gift, I can’t imagine. That was a jest. I’m not trying to be petty.

I’ve thought about Ser Jaime’s actions. While I hate him for hurting you, and think he doesn’t
deserve your forgiveness, you should have whatever makes you happy. Also, if his inaction truly did save you, then I find myself reluctantly grateful to him. While at times I’ve been envious of Robb’s relationship with Theon Greyjoy, I’ve never been driven to such jealousy, nor do I think I ever would. But Cersei Lannister is mad by all accounts, and who knows what thoughts occurs in her head. I’m grateful she’s gone.

My advice for Jaime is to give him a method to make amends without having to say it aloud. If his pride is truly as powerful as you say, then he will never speak the words. But he may feel them, so give him some opportunity to prove it. Put him to work, Dany—the harsher the task the better. Something he’ll really loathe. If he’s truly sorry, he’ll do it—if not, then you gave him a chance and can finally put it behind you. I wish you the outcome you desire.

There’s not enough time for a reply—this raven won’t have even reached you by the time we leave—so I’ll send you a missive after the tourney to tell you our next destination.

Yours,

Jon.

Fifth Moon, 23rd day

Jon didn’t win the archery contest.

As expected, the bow was difficult to draw, and tired him quickly, but it’s arrows flew with such speed and accuracy that he’d gotten dozens of inquiries about the design. Xhobar’s style, to his surprise, put less strain on his arms, and thus he’d adopted it happily. Stannis Baratheon would no doubt receive flocks of ravens soon. The master of tourneys was already scrambling to re-write the rules.

He came in third—to everyone’s shock. Oberyn’s booming laughter had been the only sound in the stands. Jon had beaten squires years older than himself, and even a few knights. He’d won five hundred gold dragons for his troubles—enough for a decent suit of steel armor. He split most into silver and copper coins, and finally paid Oberyn back for the dragon pin.

Domeric hadn’t won the melee, but had remained amongst the last fifty men—impressive for a squire. He’d already had a group of partners ready and waiting before the game even began, and had used them well. The charming, smiling boy Jon had observed was so alien that he’d shaken his head and laugh with reluctant amusement.

In the joust, Domeric lasted longer than anyone expected; he truly was talented with horses. Jon believed that the only time Domeric Bolton was truly honest was while atop his steed. That smile was from himself alone. He’d been defeated four rounds from the end.

Oberyn had won the joust. He’d stuck his opponents so brutally with the lance, nearly all had been out in the first round. The Viper hadn’t smiled once—for him, war was a serious matter. He’d named the elder Lady Fossoway—the current Lord’s mother, who must be at least four decades older than Oberyn—as the Queen of Love and Beauty. The woman had giggled like a maiden.

They remained at House Fossoway another week to take part in the feasts. For the first time, Lords and Ladies came up to talk to Jon of their own volition, and few mentioned his bastard status. Jon had found himself thankful for the strict etiquette lesson Lady Catelyn had enforced as he’d grown. She may have disliked him and kept him under her thumb, but she’d ensured he’d never shame his
father with poor manners. He’d used the opportunity and his skills to spread the word about the 
moss, and tell them Moat Cailin was looking for any men and women they could spare—no matter 
their birth. He rather thought they went away impressed. Cider Hall was a success.

He told Dany all of this in a letter dated for the sixth moon, 3rd day. Their next destination was Horn 
Hill, the seat of House Tarly.

On the way they’d pass by Highgarden, the seat of House Tyrell, the Lords Paramount of the 
Mander and the liege lords of the Reach. Oberyn had received a letter from Olenna Tyrell, which 
he’d shared with Jon and Domeric. While it was signed by Lord Mace Tyrell, Oberyn told them he 
 knew exactly who’d penned it. Years ago in a tourney, Oberyn had accidentally crippled the heir, 
Willas Tyrell. The relationship between Dorne and the Reach had never been pleasant, but after that 
incident it had degraded into hostility.

To illustrious Prince Oberyn Martell of the vibrant kingdom of Dorne,

House Tyrell of Highgarden welcomes all creatures to break fast with us, to walk beside us as 
friends, in full accordance with the tradition of guest rights past and present. We have learned news 
of the tourney at Cider Hall, and give full congratulations to you, Prince, for your achievement at 
the joust. The thought your victory, so common is it, sweetens our days and nights, and brings honor 
to our table. Should you decide to grace us with your presence, the knights of Highgarden, both old 
and new, dream of meeting such a champion.

We look forward to your stay with us, be it for a scant instant or in perpetuity. Our fields, rich of 
nutrients and pregnant with crops, breathlessly anticipate your presence and the privilege to nourish 
you and grow strong.

We spread this invitation to your squire, Jon Snow, and look forward to discussing the possibility of 
trade between Moat Cailin and the kingdom of the Reach. Of course, young Lord Jon cannot be 
offered the same welcome as a prince, may he pardon our dedication to tradition.

Praying for your everlasting health,

Lord Mace Tyrell, Lord Paramount of the Mander, and liege lord of the Reach.

The words were flowery and pleasant and sugary sweet, and yet they made Jon horribly nervous. He 
remembered that Highgarden had been amongst those that offered to squire him, and wondered just 
how displeased they were at the rejection.

Domeric tilted his head and read the letter again, then flicked his eyes up to Oberyn. “If I’m reading 
this correctly, Lady Olenna despises you, and should you grace her halls she’ll not only ensure you 
ever leave, but that you become fertilizer for the crops. It’ll be a tragic accident against one of her 
knight’s, of course—accidents do happen.” Domeric’s lip curved. “Certainly, the most pleasant death 
threat I’ve ever read, Prince Oberyn.”

“She would not kill me, if it came to it—too complicated to cover up, you understand—but grievous 
jury is guaranteed,” Oberyn smiled, admiring the letter. “I will have to keep this and show Ellaria. 
She will very much enjoy it.”

“It’s a direct invitation for me, isn’t it?” Jon asked.

Oberyn shrugged. “Invitation…command. Call it what you will. Know that if you scorn it, your 
trade plans will meet a swift demise. Your moss will either be found to be toxic, which you somehow 
missed, or some other problem will be discovered. Soon, no House of the Reach—or any House
who hears of it—will risk trading with you. The Tyrells do not coddle disobedient crops; they pull them out by the root.”


He left Cider Hall hoping that his stay at Highgarden was the shortest one yet.

*****

It turned out that Ser Davos was a genius. The first time she brought the younger children sweets—a flavor most have never even tasted, considering their standard fare was some brown sloth the Septas were perpetually cooking—they swarmed her with eager eyes. Her cloak had begun grubby from unwashed hands and her small box of sweets emptied within moments, but they’d smiled so happily she didn’t even mind it.

The older boys and girls, many of which were her age, were harder to convince. One boy in particular—Gavin, three years her elder—always stared at her with narrow eyes and a scowl, as if waiting for her to try to steal one of the youngest children and eat them! He had stringy brown hair and dark eyes, freckles all over his face and shoulders, and was so skinny it was shocking. He also smelled horrible. But one time, when she’d wrinkled her nose when he’d gotten too close, he’d only flashed his yellow teeth and said, “You’d choose to smell like this too, yer ladyship, lest you wanted to be a whore.”

Ser Justin had overheard and, affronted, had made to grab him—but Gavin was quick, and had ducked Justin’s arm and disappeared into the alley nearby. Dany had asked Ser Justin what he’d meant, but neither he, nor Cressen, nor Myra had answered her!

So she’d cornered Syrio one morning while the other two handed out more sweets, and he’d quietly explained that there were many a men that preyed upon children. She remember Tyene and Clayton Suggs, and, sickened, had understood.

It had only increased her resolve. No one would have to bathe in filth at Moat Cailin just to feel safe! But no matter how hard she tried to talk to Gavin about it, he just scowled at her and ignored her. And because of that, so did most of the other children. He had their trust—she was only a stranger who wanted to “use you till you’re all dried up,” according to Gavin.

So they took her sweets, and ignored her words. This pattern continued for nearly three months, and she never stopped trying to corner Gavin. It was difficult, because he didn’t actually live in the orphanage—the children had to leave after their tenth Nameday, because the Septas could no longer feed them, but he returned every day without fail. He always had something with him: a piece of stale bread, an old fish, sometimes even a fruit; which especially exciting amongst the children. Most of his treasures, which she’d understood were likely stolen, went into the ever-simmering stew.

It made Dany sick to know they lived like this—and angry that he kept stopping her from fixing it! Couldn’t they see her way was better? Ser Justin and her other guard—one of a rotating number—always agreed.

One day, she’d gotten so frustrated, she’d ordered Ser Justin to wait in the shadows on the path Gavin always came from. When he finally appeared, holding some bread, Justin surged out and grabbed him. Dany stepped out of the shadows and put her hands on her hips, scowling.

She’d opened her mouth to berate the older boy, to demand that he stop being stubborn, but froze when she registered the pure terror on his face. Gone was the sneer and scowl and bravado. Only a scared little boy was left. She’d never seen such fear before.
Tears were gathering in his eyes, and he released a broken little sound that nearly made her bleed.

“L-let him go!” she ordered, voice shaking. “Justin—let him go!”

Her knight immediately did so, and Gavin stumbled forward and landed hard on his knees. She saw him wince, and her throat closed up in, her apology choking her. At his feet the bread had fallen into a puddle—now inedible.

“I just wanted you to listen!” she said in a rush. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Yer just like them!” he screamed, voice cracking. There were tears in his eyes, and she felt it like a punch to the gut. “You bloody highborn don’t care ‘bout us! Ya just wanna use us and force us! Never listenin’! Always wantin’ your own way!”

He grabbed the bread and threw it at her. She raised her arms instinctively and flinched at it hit her midsection, leaving a soggy stain. He turned and ran into another ally, disappearing in a heartbeat. Dany stood there, heart in her throat, feeling physically sick. A clatter from behind jarred her, and she turned to see the orphanage door ajar—and dozens of small eyes staring at her in condemnation.

She felt like she couldn’t breath. For the first time, Daenerys Targaryen turned tail and ran, humiliated and sick with regret.

She stayed away for two weeks. How could she ever show her face among them again? Gavin’s words wouldn’t leave her, and she felt ill. *Am I…a bad person?*

It was Tyene that finally snapped her out of it. It took a lot of prodding, but the older girl finally got Dany to tell her the full, humiliating story. “I didn’t mean to scare him—I just couldn’t take it anymore! They’ll have houses and food and work at the Moat; why didn’t he understand?”

Tyene dapped at her tears with a soft cloth, and then urged her up to sit at the vanity. She saw her distorted face in the polished silver looking-glass. Tyene picked up a brush and began to draw it through her hair. For many seconds, it was silent, but the soothing motion eventually calmed her and stopped her tears.

“Tell me, m’lady, would you ever trust Cersei Lannister?”

Dany looked up, mouth falling open. “Of course not. Tyene, how could you ask that—”

“Why not?” she interrupted, continuing her brushing. Dany started at her reflection, but when Tyene only stayed silent—expectant—Dany realised she was serious.

“She’s horrible,” Daenerys finally answered, angry in her voice. She’s tormented me for years and is just so *mean* and then she—” the princess ruthlessly off, anger rising as she remembered.

“Had she done none of this to you—had you spent your childhood at Dragonstone and ventured to King’s Landing for the very first time just a few months ago, would you have trusted her?”

Dany immediate opened her mouth to say *no*, but then… hesitated. “I…well, I wouldn’t know her then, so…but she’d still be the same person!…Oh.”

Tyene smiled. “You have a kind heart, my lady. But those children don’t know that yet—they don’t know you. This Gavin, skinny as he is, could take the food he steals and horde it for himself, feed his belly which no doubt cries in hunger. But instead he always returns and shares it with the others. Would this boy stand in your way for no reason?”
“He’s trying to protect them.” Dany slumped, chastised. “I-I always just…I didn’t think about that. I just thought he hated me and…maybe I am like all the other highborn.”

Tyene made a disagreeing sound. “You wouldn’t be going down there if you were; you’d send a servant to round up workers, with no interest in their agreement. You, my lady, are simply a tad to passionate about doing things your own way—and quickly. But some things need a finer touch. Patience.”

“Have I ruined it?” Daenerys whispered, looking into her reflection. Her stomach roiled at the thought of going back there, or seeing their condemnation and dislike. Being disliked for herself rather than her family name was a new experience…but maybe it didn’t have to be a bad thing. At least this was, she could change how they saw her, unlike for her long-dead family, whose reputations were carved in stone.

“No,” she answered her own question. “No, I can fix this. I-I’ll show them who I really am!” She’d adapt—she was good at that. Tyene kissed her hair, smiling. The older girl smelled like hot spice and cool peppermint. “Tyene, I’m going to need lots of sweets…and…I have to go see Maester Cressen!”

“Yes, m’lady.”

Although…Dany wrinkled her nose. She was not looking forward to having to apologize to Gavin. He may be trying to protect them, but she still didn’t like him—he was annoying and stubborn and always sneering, almost like…oh.

Dany remembered Jon’s last letter, and had another idea. If there was one thing Dany was very good at, it was understanding what people wanted—and coming up with ways to get them. Had Tyene turned around, she’d have seen Daenerys’s smile turn a little bit evil.

*****

Daenerys lived by a simple truth: if there was something she wanted, she didn’t stop until it was hers. She didn’t think she was a bad person, most times, but she knew she’d go to a lot of lengths to get what she wanted.

Accompanied by Ser Justin, she walked into the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard’s office. Ser Barristan Selmy looked up, and his eyes widened when he saw her. “My lady—”

She raised her chin. “I want Ser Jaime every first, third, and fifth’s morning of the week. Until the noon meal.”

Barristan stared at her, his old face sagging with age and confusion. “My lady, I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

She kept her chin raised, lips pursed, and simply stared at him. She’s seen her cousin do this to people when he was displeased, and they were always pushed into speaking. They’d grow more and more uncomfortable the longer he remained silent.

After a few seconds, he cracked and said, “My lady, as much as I wish to grant you this request, I cannot.”

She narrowed her eyes angrily, but forced her lips to remain closed.

“Ser Jaime is a Kingsguard, he has responsibilities—”
“He’s always drunk now—you don’t need him,” she finally interrupted. “He’s only still a Kingsguard because the king doesn’t care, and because you can’t banish him. So, let me have him.”

Barristan frowned, and disapproval clouding his sad eyes. “Jaime Lannister is not one you should spend your time with, my lady, he is dishonorable and—”

“You called me ‘my lady,’” Dany interrupted, voice frosting.

His mouth opened, closed, then “Well—I, yes.”

“Those loyal to me, to my family, always call me ‘princess’—even though I am no longer that.”

His blue eyes widened, and his face paled. His lower lip trembled.

She continued, ruthless. She’d wanted to say these things for years, but never had the fortitude. But she wasn’t doing this for herself—not entirely—she was doing it for others.

“My grandfather knighted you, my father honored you, my brother loved you—and you serve the man who brought my dynasty to the ground. You bent the knee to the man who killed my brother Rhaegar, and then you began to serve him. Him and his wife and their son, who have tormented me since I was five years old. And all you ever did was show me a weak bit of pity. You are a traitor—and that is dishonorable.”

“He spared my life,” Barristan gasped out, a feeble defence. He looked as if she’d done him grievous injury. Guilt was mixing sickly with a righteous rage within her.

“He did—and you could have asked him to pardon your oath—the oath you made to my House. Ser Gerold Hightower, Prince Lewyn Martell, Ser Oswell Whent, Ser Arthur Dayne, and Ser Jonothor Darry—your brothers—all died for my family, for my brother. And you bent the knee to his killer.”

Barristan the Bold look as if she’d grab a sword and run him through. Daenerys Targaryen didn’t care. If anything, the memory of the children who had to eat slop while the king this man chose to serve feasted and drank every day drove her. And what of Joffrey? The servants lived in fear of his ascension, yet this honorable knight would serve him as well. None of them cared—but she did.

Sometimes only fire could cleanse the old and rotting and make space for the new life to grow.

“Give me Jaime Lannister. You have no use for him, but I do. You owe me this, Lord Commander Barristan Selmy. On my brother’s grave.”

Daenerys always got what she wanted. And if she cried later, hating herself just a bit for her cruelty, well…no one had to know.

*****

Jaime jerked awake when his door banged open and collided with the wall. He lay face down on his floor, and his head ached and spun. Gods, how had he gotten here? Hadn’t he been at a tavern…? His hand twitched, registering that he was lying upon his cloak, so he’d definitely been outside at some point.

Jaime groaned at the pain in his head, and the sound was pathetic even to his own ears. “Go ‘way Selmy, I don’t fucking—”

“You smell like a sewer and look worse than the homeless men down in Flea Bottom,” a voice scolded, disgusted. “The Jaime Lannister—even sneering couldn’t make you uglier now.”
He jerked his head up when he registered the voice, and immediately regretted it as the room spun and his stomach roiled. He flopped back down again, growing and closing his eyes, begging all the gods that his insides stayed where they belonged. *Seven hells, have I died finally and this is my punishment? Eternity in pain and being berated by Daenerys Targaryen?* The gods were cruel indeed.

Something tapped against his shoulder, once, twice, and then a third time—hard enough to hurt. He opened his burning eyes to see a green slipper covering a tiny foot. She was actually nudging him with her foot, as if he was a dead animal she was poking with a stick.

“Which hell is this? I don’t remember the septa mentioning it.”

“Well, you’re not *dead*. Your tongue still works. Unfortunately.”

He pushed himself up, arms shaking from the effort, and managed to roll over and sit up against his bed. He tilted his head back and stared up at her. She was in dark green silk, and he could see the darker pants underneath the split sides of the dress. He wondered is she was aware that some of the ladies were copying her new style. With Cersei gone, more people felt free to openly talk to her.

“I’d offer you some refreshments, but, as you can see,” he waves a half-hearted hand towards himself. “I’m quite hungover, and I doubt I could stand up. Always nice of you to visit, of course. Taunting and scowling? We *must* do this again.”

“Ser Barristan gave you to me,” she informed him, ignoring his words completely. Then she marched to his drawer and yanked it open, pulling out clothes at random. She seemed to be looking for something specific, and everything else she tossed to the floor.

He’d protest, but her words were still spinning in his tired brain. He opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again—it stayed that way for a good moment. “I—what?”

“Every first, third, and fifth’s morning—from morning meal to noon mean. You’re coming down to the orphanage at Flea Bottom with me. I have use for you.”

He stared at her, and she finished her search though his things. He noted she placed brown pants, a green tunic, and brown leather gloves on the bed. Then she frowned and looked around, oblivious to his stare. He eyes narrowed on his cloak, and she wrinkled her small nose. “Did you sleep in the mud, Jaime? Never mind, cousin Stannis has a few cloaks, you can borrow one.”

Then she looked down at him again, and met his eyes. She placed her hand on her hips, and lifted her nose. “Well?”

“What is this?” he asked, his voice hollow and devoid of his usual derision. He was too tired. Was she doing this—acting so normal—to be cruel? Or was this really a drunken dream.

“I have decided to forgive you,” she declared, but he heard the tiny wavering of her voice. He studied her face, saw for the first time the tension there, the way her lips shook, the unsureness in her eyes. She swallowed. “Even though you have not said you are sorry, because your pride is so large it needs its own castle. Even though you are very annoying and sometimes mean. But I can be mean too, so that’s okay.”

“Don’t be cruel,” he whispered, voice shaking. “If—if this is some lie or—or revenge, then—”

“Gods, Jaime!” she snapped, and strode over to kick his thigh. He yelped. “You’re like a book bound by a blind maester! Someone has to take you apart and put you back together the *normal* way! No this isn’t revenge, you *idiot*. It’s a *chance*. ”
He shook his head, disbelieving. “No—why—I, Cersei and…”

“I don’t like you very much right now, and you don’t like me…she was your sister, and I am sorry about that…but I’m happy she’s gone. But in the end, it was her own choice, and it doesn’t have to matter between us. I want to forgive you, but since you’ll never say it, then you can show it.”

He just blinked at her. His heart was beating and he felt like he was at a crossroads. He knew then that this moment would likely impact the rest of his life, but he couldn’t tell which direct would ruin him. Maybe both would, in the end…but only one road felt hopeful.

“Bathe, each, and dress,” she ordered, imperious. “We’ll be waiting at the eastern gate—the place we last talked. If—if you don’t come, I’ll understand. I wont…bother you anymore.” The last words were forced out, almost a whisper. She cleared her throat, nodded, and strode out.

For endless seconds, he simply stared at the door.

*Crossroads.*

With a groan, he slammed his head back against the bed, blinked up at the ceiling…and push to his feet. He grabbed the clothes and made his way to the bathing chamber.

The last thing he expected was to end up standing before a group of dirty lowborn children, who stared at Daenerys beside him with distrust. One of the older boys stepped forward and crossed his arms.

“My name is Daenerys Targaryen,” she announced, pushing down her hood, and he looked down at her in surprise at the uncertainty. The children stirred, many eyes widening as they registered the name. This girl had stared down lords and magisters and knights—yet she seemed unsure before a group of lowborns. “My family built this city, and even though—even though they were overthrown, I still think it’s my responsibility to take care of this place. As—as much as I can.”

“Yea, to take us away and force us to work in some cold castle,” the boy sneered.

She narrowed her eyes at him, opened her mouth, but then closed it with a snap. She took a breath.

She nodded. “Yes—one day, I’ll be going to the North, to live in a castle with my husband. But the North has very few people, so I had the idea of searching for people to fill it. Cooks and maids and guards and—and everything. You’d have homes and food and—”

“And you could do whatever you wanted ta us, right?” the boy again, and Jaime was growing rather annoyed with him.

“Yes, food and housing and a castle to live in,” he snapped, sneering at the little ingrate. “A horrible fate compared to rats and shit.”

The boy opened his mouth again, cheeks flushing in anger.

“I’m sorry,” Daenerys announced, and they swung their gazes to her. Both were equally aghast that she was lowing herself to apologize to a lowborn urchin. Jaime was disgusted—these children should be begging for a place in her castle. He opened him mouth to tell them all that, but she glared at him.

She turned back to the kid. “I’m sorry…Gavin. I didn’t understand, and I tried to get my own way
using force. I don’t want to do that. To any of you. I just hate seeing how you have to live, I want you to have more—fresh food and clean clothes and your own home and jobs. You don’t have to believe me, but at least let me come back and show you who I am. To prove that I won’t hurt you, never again. If, when I leave for my castle, you’d rather remain here, I understand. But until then…”

She turned to Justin, who handed her a leather book.

She turned back to them and presented the cover, like a peace offering. “Maybe I can read to you—tell you stories of my family. I know that my father was not a good man, but not every Targaryen was like that! This book had four hundred years of stories about knights and maidens and dragons and—and maybe you’d like to hear them?” she finished weakly. Jaime ground his teeth—she was actually lowering herself to try and gain the trust of a bunch of nothings.

Most of the younger children were perking up, looking at the bound leather in curiosity, while many of the elder ones still look weary but curious. The little urchin leader still had a scowl on his face, and Jaime ached to beat that attitude out of him.

“And I brought you a present, Gavin—as an apology.”

The kid’s scowl faded, just a bit, and a bit of curiosity shined through. She smiled at him—and he softened further. “What is it?”

Daenerys beamed, and then swung her arms towards Jaime with a flourish. For a second, Jaime actually look to the empty space beside him, baffled, before he suddenly understood. As one, man and boy snapped, “What?”

“Ser Jaime became a knight at fifteen. He can teach you and anyone else who wants to learn how to fight for real. We’ve even brought along some practice swords. And before we leave, you and Jaime can go to the market and buy fresh food—he’s very rich, you see, but wastes it all on drink. It’ll be perfect—then no man or knight can ever threaten you again.”

She smiled at them both, obviously having planned it all out.

“I will not—” Jaime began, aghast that she wanted him to teach this little urchin. He, a kingsguard, lowering himself to interact with a lowborn boy!

“I don’t need no—” the boy protested, mouth twisting in disgust. Jaime really hated that kid.

“Shut up!” she snapped, voice shrill. Nearly everyone flinched.

She glared at the kid. “And you are turning down a chance to learn to fight from a real knight? I thought you wanted to protect them?” The boy opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He snapped it shut and glared hatefully.

She looked between them, but when neither protested, she smiled. As one, Jaime and Gavin locked gazes, and gave nearly identical sneers of disgust.

Daenerys actually laughed. “I knew there was a reason you annoyed me so much, Gavin.” She stepped around the indignant boy, and took a seat at one of the old wooden benches. “Now, I’m going to read my story, for whomever is interested.” Then she opened the book and did just that. A small gaggle of brave, curious children broke away from the group and went to sit at her feet. She smiled and continued.
Jaime and the urchin just stood there, staring at her.

“She—she’s so—” Gavin broke off with a curse.

“How do you think I ended up here?” Jaime snapped—before realizing he’d actually spoken with a lowborn. For a second, then were comrades united by a shared frustration—and then then realize who the other was and turned away in disgust. Jaime seethed at the blatant disrespect; this boy’s attitude would have never been borne at Casterly Rock.

Daenerys was determined to make him suffer.

For many minutes, they just stood there, watching as more and more children gathered around to hear about the Targaryens’ flight from the doomed Valyria.

“Have you ever held a sword, urchin?” Jaime finally muttered.

“…No.”

“Fucking hells.”

*****

Dear Jon,

Congratulations on the tourney, Jon! Third place is very impressive. I’ve told everyone, and cousin Stannis especially was pleased. I’m happy the bow pleased you. Don’t worry about my Nameday, I have many more to come, and you’ll plenty of chances to defeat my cousin. This was also I jest—or maybe a challenge?

I’m thankful to hear that you’ve had luck on your search. Everything is going very well with the orphanage. I’ve taken to reading them stories about my ancestors—all children love dragons! It took a while, but I think they may be starting to trust me. I no longer take Syrio with me—he’s gained many students, and I don’t want to waste his time any longer.

I took your advice and put Jaime to work! It’s making me entirely too giddy to see how much he hates it. You see, we’ll need men-at-arms at the Moat, so I’ve decided to force Jaime to teach the older boys how to fight like knights. One boy, Gavin, cares deeply about his fellows, and I think he’d make an excellent captain of the guard. He’s adamant about staying in King’s Landing, but I’m hopeful.

Yours,

Dany.

Sixth Moon, 18th day

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who's curious, this is what my Jon looks like! :D

This is grown-up Dany, although the art isn't specifically depicting Daenerys. I just love
this artist so much! :D
https://satelliteghost.deviantart.com/art/Didy-271695017

Also, few people ever mention Dany's dreams. Do you guys think they're too vague? Any guesses about this one? We're drawing closer to the main plot >:)

Also, Jon and Dany will meet late Act six. This is Act four, which will end in chapter 40. Yes, it's taking a long time, but I take my tags seriously >:D
Bastard's Youth

Chapter Notes

I want to thank everyone who’s kept up with this story and waited patiently for an update. I’m sorry I didn’t respond. There have been some medical issues in my family the past two months, and I wasn’t in a great place. Exams didn’t help, lol. Thankfully, a couple of days ago we got word from the doctor, and things are a lot better! :D

So, in celebration of finally having some good news, my motivation came back and I give you, Highgarden! >:D
Also, I'm extending Act 4 by one chapter, since Highgarden was actually only supposed to be one scene, by the Tyrells are too interesting and, whoops, here's 14K.

All my thanks to MariDark for her support these past months. Also, to everyone who has bookmarked her story, the updates are not showing up for some people, and she released chapter 8 recently on her amazing story, The Court of Bastards! :D

Enjoy, and thanks again to everyone who asked for updates, the fact that you love HLHD so much really boosted my mood! I'll reply to all comments soon, sorry for the wait. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Highgarden was magnificent. There was no other word more suited to describe the castle, the land, even the rich village surrounding it. Here, even the peasants lived in large stone houses carved with roses. The palace was larger than the Red Keep—although not taller—but he couldn’t tell if it was larger than Winterfell. The castle was built upon a tall hill, looming like a beacon over the surrounding fields and villages, and surrounded three alabaster walls—each taller than its predecessor, topped with triangular merlons, and periodically intercepted by a turret. The palace itself was composed of two large rectangular Keeps and a series of tall towers with grand golden spires reaching for the clouds. Both the outer walls and the inner palace was covered in foliage; a castle that had never been disturbed by outside interference could afford such a potentially dangerous decoration. Flags depicting the House sigil—a golden rose upon a green background—flew proudly upon every tower. The palace was a work of art crafted by those that valued beauty and presentation above all else. A maiden’s song come to life.

It was fitting, Jon thought, that this place was the heart of etiquette in Westeros. “Chivalry is all about appearances,” Lord Stark had once said in response to Sansa’s lamentations for the lack of Knights in the North “A man with a shield is no more noble than a man without—he only has a more impressive title.” Jon doubted that his sister had taken the words to heart, but he had. If he were knighted one day, he wouldn’t forget that it made him no more honorable than he’d been before. Just like Highgarden’s physical beauty couldn’t hide that those within were capable of the same brutality as every other person.

During the two-week trip to Highgarden, Jon had taken advantage of Oberyn’s knowledge and interrogated the prince about the Tyrells. Jon and Domeric had gotten a swift education into their history, and then a more detailed explanation of each member of the family. One thing Jon had taken particular interest in was the fact that only the Reach had ever defeated Robert Baratheon during the
Rebellion. It was Randyll Tarly’s keen military mind that had won the Battle of Ashford, causing the then-Lord Baratheon to withdraw before Lord Mace could join the battle. According to Oberyn, Mace Tyrell likely took his time on purpose, as he was a man that enjoyed the feast to celebrate a victory more than the battle to get it. He was not a fool, but no great mind either. Lord Mace was lucky in life and cunning enough to know when to take a back seat and let others battle it out. The Tyrells were good at that: waiting for their opportunity.

“The Tyrell’s were mere stewards, broody boy, before the time of the Dragons. A small House, with the blood of their liege lords carried through the female line. A negligent claim. And yet, when the Gardeners burned, the Roses flourished from their ashes. No matter how alluring the perfume and brilliant the petals, never forget the thorns.” Those had been Oberyn’s last words to his squires before they’d split up well outside the village, Highgarden only a white speck in the distance. Despite the Prince’s desire to come along and cause mischief, Oberyn knew how important this meeting was for Jon and his future House. So, he’d handed Jon a missive to deliver to Lord Willas Tyrell—he and Oberyn were apparently friends—and then the prince had ridden ahead to Horn Hill. They’d join him on the road on in three days.

As he and Domeric rode closer to the white beacon of a palace, Jon disquiet grew. Without Oberyn’s protection, he suddenly felt like a foolish young boy playing a game whose rules he scarcely knew. He could barely talk to the Lords and Ladies of the Reach—how would he fair against their Queen of Thornes? He’d never felt so far from home. The honesty of the North—reflected in it’s plain, brutal beauty—was the antithesis of Highgarden.

Jon felt all the pressure of the impending meeting—and the threat of failure. He couldn’t be of the North, here. He had to speak their language. Traveling with Oberyn had taught him the importance of knowing who he was speaking to. Traveling with Domeric had taught him how to adapt—or at least why he’d need to.

“You’ve made me even more paranoid that I was, Dom.”

“It’ll serve you well,” was all his companion said. Most of his concentration was on carefully untangling a twig from his horse’s mane, murmuring to the beast in comfort. Jon hoped Domeric treated his future wife and children half as well as his steed.

The escort that met them at the great gates were composed of six guards and a leader who introduced himself as Garth Tyrell, uncle to Lord Mace, and the Lord Seneschal of Highgarden. He was elaborately dressed in a heavily embroidered tunic riddled with jewels—a style that still offended Jon’s Northern sensibilities. While Lord Stark’s outfits were always of good quality, his was a muted elegance rather than an ostentatious show of wealth. His sons had followed suit, and even Theon had eventually taken to dressing like Lord Stark. The Lord Seneschal, then, looked faintly ridiculous—but Jon had been trained not to gawk by now, and clothing didn’t concern Domeric.

Keeping his nose from wrinkling at the caustic perfume was a bit harder.

As lord Garth led them up towards the castle, through the famous briar labyrinth, he passionately described Highgarden’s its history. “We even have a few weirwoods in the godswood—the Three Singers, they’re called. Ghastly things, so overgrown that they seem to be one tree. But, well, I know you Northerners have your queer rituals. You have free reign of the castle after dinner, of course—you’re to be treated as guests.”

Garth looked at Jon for a second with a sniff, and Jon did his best to ignore the implication that he didn’t deserve such good treatment. He should be used to it by now, but his success at the tourney had diminished the scorn he received. Foolish to believe it would last. His response was a bit stiff. “Lord Mace is a gracious host, Lord Seneschal.”
The lord nodded as if the praise was obvious.

“Would you be so kind as to provide us with some chickens and goats, my Lord?” Domeric asked. “We simply must honor the gods by way of ritual sacrifice, lest we Northerners and those around us be struck down.”

The man’s eyes widened comically, and the closest guards shot them horrified looks. Jon couldn’t help but snorting out a laugh. He tried and failed to turn it into a cough.

Garth’s narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Domeric smiled, the picture of innocence. “A jest, my lord.”

The Lord Seneschal seemed to be gritting his teeth when he smiled and said, “Of course.”

Jon couldn’t resist adding, “And everyone knows the old gods only accept human sacrifices, my lord.” It wasn’t a lie—in times past, the disemboweled bodies of traitors were hung from the branches of the weirwood. Their blood and guts were an homage to the old gods.

Garth seemed to turn green.

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After an elaborate dinner with the family, they’d all retired to a large, public solar. Jon and Domeric had exchanged their plain travel clothes for a more expensive outfit they’d purchased prior to their arrival, which was stiff with disuse and grander than Jon was comfortable. He was bedecked in deep blue with grey embroidery, while Domeric was in a maroon tunic with white decorations. Their clothes didn’t hold a candle to those worn by the Tyrells, but they were expensive enough to not be insulting.

Currently, Jon was seated in a plush chair before an unlit fireplace, perpendicular to a large settee where lord Mace was situated between his mother and his wife. Jon had expected Lord Mace to ask for a private meeting, but the man seemed to have no qualms talking business here before the family. Jon wondered if this was a slight against him, or whether this was simply how the Tyrells conducted their meetings. It would make sense: this method gave the Lady Olenna the opportunity to listen in without seeming as if she were.

Currently, the matriarch sat beside her son and looked to be the picture of boredom. Had Jon met Olenna Tyrell before meeting Domeric, he’d likely have taken her at face value. She was a tiny woman, only a bit taller than Jon himself, and her limbs were shrunken and spotted with age. Her face was placid and her gaze vague, as if her age were catching up and muddling her mind. Even her elaborate dress and headpiece, which were cut to make her seem larger, couldn’t hide her fragility of form.

Besides the elaborate trappings and the way she held herself—the way all highborn held themselves, with an air of superiority that only came from a life of being served—she looked like old Nan, the nurse at Winterfell. Kind old Nan, who spent her days knitting and telling them fanciful tails of White Walkers, ice dragons, and giants.

Jon thought that Lady Olenna and Old Nan shared that in common—telling tales. Except Olenna Tyrell’s falsehood was her frailty of mind. Like Domeric lied with a smile he didn’t feel, Olenna did so with her age and gender. Oberyn had warned Jon not to be fooled by those outward trappings. She was dangerous and held the key for Moat Cailin’s future. If Olenna Tyrell decided to dismiss the moss and spread her disapproval, other houses would follow suit. But if she supported the trade agreement, Jon’s fledgling House would be able to stand on its own feet.
The part of him raised in his father’s household found this matriarchal system... disconcerting. Here was his first true example of a female in power, although he knew Dorne would be much more open about it. Such a thing was completely alien in the North—even Bear Island, with its female warrior culture, followed the male line of succession. In Winterfell, Sansa and Arya were never present during times when Lord Stark performed his duties—inspecting the castle and surrounding lands, meeting with his people to settle disputes, dispensing justice to lawbreakers. And Lady Stark was only present when the matter directly related to the running of Winterfell.

He knew it wouldn’t be that way in his own home—Dany would likely want to be part of all decision making, and that worried him. He had no role model for such a system—what if he did something to insult her? With a mental slap, Jon tore these thoughts down and forcefully stuffed them into a dark corner alongside his many other ruminations. He had more imminent concerns now: making sure their House could prosper.

Jon would get that—he’d sworn an oath. Now he just needed to convince the gathered party. “She is a shadow queen, broody boy, and you must treat her as such. Should she be made aware that her true power is known, she will be more guarded.”

“Wouldn’t she know anyway? I’m your squire.”

“No one knows anything unless you confirm it. Perhaps you are simply my pawn and nothing more.”

So, Jon kept his gaze and words fixed on Lord Tyrell, only glancing around occasionally in a show of politeness. The large man, with his cheeks flushed red and his belly straining in his elaborate tunic, was asking Jon various questions about the Moat and the moss, although he seemed more interested in the discussion Domeric and Willas were having in the smaller settee opposite Jon’s chair. But then, Jon supposed Lord Mace didn’t have to be too invested in the conversation when the true decision rested on the woman to his left.

“Lord Howland Reed is my father’s bannerman, my lords and ladies. His House has held dominion over the Neck for thousands—”

“Speak up, boy,” Lady Olenna interrupted, taking a delicate bite of her lemon cake and chewing leisurely. Jon knew better than to interrupt. “These are old ears. And do forgo the history lesson. You’re a squire, not a maester—although I see how you might be confused, considering the company you keep.” She held up her goblet but didn’t glance at it, ordering, “More wine.”

A nimble servant detached from the wall—an ornate, rose-engraved pitcher in hand—and obediently filled her cup.

Olenna took a sip, then nodded. “Arbor gold. A large supply of it was part of my dowry, when I shed the Redwyne name. Born of a cultivator, married to a cultivator. Have you it in the North, Jon Snow? It’s the only real drink.”

“No, my lady,” Jon answered, careful to reveal no emotion. He didn’t know if he’d succeeded, too puzzled by the change in topic. “We mostly had ale and mead, at Winterfell—although Lord Stark rarely indulged. The Lady Catelyn enjoyed the occasional red imported from the south.” He took a careful sip from his goblet. “It is excellent—thank you for your hospitality.” It really was delicious—smooth and rich with a faint hint of sweetness. But he had to pace himself—if he got drunk here, he’d show himself to be a fool and they’d take every advantage.

“No, I’d imagine your father wouldn’t have a taste for the finer things,” Olenna murmured. “Dour man, last I recall. It’s why your existence was such a shock to us all. But, I suppose even the greatest
men have their weaknesses and shames.”

Jon stiffened and exhaled through his nose, lips pressed tightly. Olenna tilted her head at him.

“She will try to anger you, boy, insult you, perhaps. She loves nothing more than finding the weakness in a person. You’re a bastard, and while only the gods know what she truly thinks of the population, she won’t politely ignore it. Don’t let your birth be the tool by which she pricks you.”

“Mother!” Lord Mace guffawed like she’d made a great jest. “Why, you mock our whole gender! Can we men not enjoy anything without reprimand?”

“It’s not my place to comment on my father’s actions, my lady,” Jon said as if Lord Mace hadn’t spoken, quiet and sober. “But I will say that he brought me into his household and raised me alongside his own trueborn children, acknowledging me before all the realms. All men have weaknesses, but my father is a great man because he took responsibility for them.”

As soon as the world let his mouth, Jon wanted to take them back. It sounded too challenging and brash—not at all like the careful lies and flattery he was supposed to enact. But it was too late…and he didn’t really regret the words. He may have bourn the insult to himself, but he couldn’t sit quietly while his father was criticized. So, Jon just straightened his shoulders against the sudden silence in the room.

“Hmm,” Olenna finally sniffed, bored and dismissive. But by some miracle, she didn’t look angry and demand they leave, and Jon exhaled carefully. In fact…she seemed to be scanning his face with a bit more attention now. Jon wanted to squirm under the regard. Domeric glanced at him, a faint smile on his lips, then he flicked his eyes towards Lord Mace. Turn the conversation back to the point, Jon.

“You have power,” Jon remembered Domeric saying. “The moss is valuable to these people, who can’t afford to use land to grow wood-burning forests.” The moss was lighter than wood; the Houses could either use the same amount of gold to buy more fuel or less gold to buy what they always had. Owning the moss was no small power.

Jon glanced at his fellow squire in gratitude, although he’d already turned back to his conversation with the Tyrell heir. Oberyn had accidentally crippled Lord Willas years ago at a tourney. It was this injury that had rekindled the animosity between Houses Tyrell and Martell. Willas had arrived at dinner leaning heavily on a cane and with a perceptible limp, but his quiet dignity and smooth manners spoke of an intelligent man who didn’t allow the deformity to conquer him. Oberyn liked men such as this, so Jon could understand the friendship between the two. Lord Willas was famed as an expert breeder of hawks, hounds, and horses. The last was why he and Domeric had been in deep discussion since they’d sat down.

Jon turned his attention back to the conversation with some reluctance, on guard for Lady Olenna’s next comment. In truth, Jon was now itching to be done with this meeting, so he could go sit under the weirwoods and breath. The trees nourished a part of him that had been asphyxiated since leaving the North. No wonder he’d felt so much calmer at Harrenhal.

He was only eleven, and he was tired. Perhaps when he was older, he’d better be able to handle stressful meeting such as this, but right now watching his words and speaking carefully for the past two hours had him all but exhausted. And Lady Olenna’s comment of him being his father’s shame hit harder than he’d shown. Still, with clenched teeth, wishing he was in a battle instead, he awkwardly tried to get the conversation back on track.

“The moss emits a mild, pleasant scent when burn, my lords and ladies. Like burning wood but with
He motioned to the fireplace.

Lady Alerie glanced up from her stitching, and there was a hint of pity in her gaze. That burned worse than Olenna’s comments. “Why, that sounds lovely. You are sure there are no dangerous effects? We simply cannot allow such a thing in the Reach.”

He’d been asked these question by every House and was glad he’d had the practice. “None at all, my lady. I’ve showcased the moss frequently on our journey here, and there is no more harm than in burning wood.”

Behind the trio, on another couch, sat the lady Margaery, Lord’s Mace’s only daughter, speaking with a female companion and her brother Lord Garlan. Margaery was Jon’s age; pretty with sable hair and doe brown eyes. She’d smiled and curtseyed elegantly when they’d met, revealing white teeth and a small dimple. Jon had done his best to bow as was needed, glad he’d spent the past months amongst various highborn daughters, so he was much more used to dealing with them than he’d been in Winterfell. He was marginally more confident about interacting with girls, but the task was still a bit daunting. He didn’t think he’d ever be truly comfortable with it, but at least he wouldn’t make a fool of himself before Dany. Still, she seemed kind enough.

Overhearing this conversation, she piped up, “Father, let’s try it! I’ve gotten letters from friends and they say it truly is pleasant.”

Lord Mace glanced at his daughter indulgently and gave his acquiesce. A servant was sent to fetch Jon’s moss pack, which he’d left with the Lord Seneschal.

Soon, they had the dried moss burning at the fireplace, and the party gathered around. Jon took a slow breath, grateful for the respite. The scent truly was pleasant—like the earth after rainfall, with a hint of spice from the fire. The Moat would always smell as such; Jon hoped Dany enjoyed it as well. He would have to ask her whether she’d spoken to lord Arryn yet—he knew both the Hand and Lord Stannis were busy men, but he wanted to know if the Vale, too, would be open to trade. The Vale was closer as well—it would be a lot easier to send ships from White Harbor.

“And you say this will burn as long as wood?” Lord Mace asked.

“Aye, my lord,” Jon quickly confirmed. His tone came out too hopeful, he chastened himself—but he was tired.

Lord Mace nodded, stroking his cleanshaven chin. “Alright, then. I’ll write to your uncle tonight to discuss the logistics.”

Jon was almost shocked but how abrupt and casually the man announced it—as if deciding something as simple as the noon meal.

“You won’t regret it, my lord!” Jon promised, feeling a massive weight leave his shoulders. He’d done it—he’d gotten the Tyrells on board!

“You’ll sell your moss to us, and we’ll distribute it throughout the Reach,” Mace nodded, sounding pleased.

Jon’s smile faltered. “My lord?”

Mace set his hands behind his back and stood. “I have to ensure the price is fair for all our people, you understand. And I know my bannermen and lands, Jon Snow—I know how to best ensure their interest and cooperation. Worry not, this will not affect the price. What the Reach paid for wood the
Tyrells will pay for your moss.”

A method of control—a monopoly. The Moat may be the source of the fuel, but the Houses of the Reach would have to buy it directly from the Tyrells or spend more coin on wood. And Jon had no doubt the Tyrells would take a cut of the profit. Jon’s eyes shot to Olenna, but she was staring into the flame placidly, not paying them any mind. And Jon began to understand that this plan had likely decided before he’d even arrived. Likely since the moment his moss been made known to them.

So, then what was the point of him even being here?

“We have an agreement, then,” Mace exclaimed, pleased.

Jon tried to think, but it was all happened so quickly, and a confirmation was on the tip of his tongue.

“A wonderful plan, my lord!” Domeric emphatically praised. “Why, how generous of you to aid Jon. Now the Moat need not make direct deals with the Houses—tedious, that!”

Olenna turned to Domeric, frowning slightly.

And Jon’s agreement faltered.

Others take you, Jon Snow you greedy bastard! Just shut up and take it! But he didn’t want to—these people really wanted the moss. But he was still new at all this—he couldn’t just make a contract that would last forever without really understanding how economics worked. He had no maester to help him.

Ah, he thought. This is why I’m here.

“My lord is generous indeed, but forgive me for I cannot agree to this proposition,” he said carefully.

Mace seemed to falter. “Why my boy, what difference would it really make? Dealing with one buyer would only simplify the matter. Unless,” Mace drew himself up, voice rising in affront, “You question our good intentions? Why, that would be an insult to me and my House.”

“I mean no disrespect, my lord,” Jon said, mind racing. “Of course, I have no doubt of your generosity and goodwill, however…” However what? However what, Jon, others take you! Gods he wished his father or uncle were here—Oh! “However, I currently have no true claim over the Moat nor will I until my marriage, as dictated by his Grace, Robert Baratheon. I, therefore, do not have the power to commit to this agreement, my lord, and I cannot in good faith give you my word until I am Lord of Moat Cailin in truth. Right now, my promise holds no weight, and to agree would be deceitful. Only my father, Lord Stark, has the power to make such a decision at this time. It is with his permission that I now inquire with interested Houses, but I cannot make such an agreement without having discussed it with my father in advance. If it pleases your lordship, I can write to them for permission this moment, for I know they’ll see your generosity, as I have, and agree.”

Jon finished and took a deep breath. It was likely the most he’d ever said consecutively. He felt a bit lightheaded from breathlessness—and panic.

Lord Mace seemed to grit his teeth, but he could find no argument against Jon’s quick thinking. He knew that only the lord of a keep could decide the House’s future, and Jon didn’t have that authority right now—thank the gods. The young boy’s heart was racing and he felt like he’d be sick. The fact that Mace didn’t immediately jump to agree told Jon that his father—who had access to a maester to explain the implications—would not have agreed.

“You are a dutiful son, Jon Snow,” Mace said after a moment, his smile returning. “Of course, I
wouldn’t wish to disturb Lord Stark at this time—we hear he has his hands full, suddenly strengthening the North. A curious affair, that, but for other times. The Reach is very interested in your moss, and we’ll surely revisit this topic when you are lord and master of the keep.”

Lady Olenna’s lips were pressed together, and Jon saw displeasure on her previously bored face. “Don’t push her too far, broody boy. She’s a woman that would turn her failure into victory to protect her reputation. That’s how the jilted became the jilter.” She straightened, and Jon saw her lips parting—and he panicked.

He was too young for this, he’d later think.

“Ten years,” Jon blurted out. He cleared his throat. “That is, I think a direct contract between our Houses for a period of ten years would ensure you can protect your people should anything be found, and it will allow my House to learn the lay of the land during these early years. After which we can…revisit the terms.”

The matriarch sat back. Jon was no longer pretending to speak with Mace, and she had lost the hazy boredom and was attending fully.


Jon cleared his throat. “I will discuss it with my lord father, but I know he’ll see the merit.” He met her gaze, almost challenging. He was aware that they were all watching the exchange. “I may be a Snow, my lady, but I am Lord Eddard Stark’s son, and my word is good.”

“Two decades,” she smiled, lips thin. He thought her the displeasure was fading. “It takes time to ensure there are no…adverse effects. Don’t you agree, son?” she turned to Mace.

The lord cleared his throat. “I was just about to suggest such a thing myself, Mother.”

Jon just bet he was.

Gods, twenty years. He’d be thirty-six—older than his father was now. It seemed an eternity. But his father was young still—robust. Lord Stark would have decades and decades more, and so would Jon. Besides, this would be a good way to form a connection to House Tyrell, without being bound to them. And if the relationship deteriorated, then his children need not sully their honor.

Besides—they still had the Vale. And whichever other land needed something to burn—it need not even be for the winter, one could use it to fuel the cooking fire.

“Twenty years, my lord. To be formally signed on the eve of my marriage.”

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Jon’s week with the Tyrells had been spent writing letters, having uncomfortable meals with the family, and getting to know them all individually. Lord Mace and his wife were courteous, but after hammering out the details of the moss, all put polite interactions with them ceased. Lady Olenna made the occasional barbed comment but unless they were regarding his father, Jon didn’t let it elicit a brash response. What did bother him were the time when she would simply stare at him, something puzzling in her gaze, and it was all he could do not to squirm and excuse himself. Luckily, they were rarely in each other’s company, as she occupied her days overseeing the running of Highgarden.

Soon, the days fell into a familiar pattern. In the mornings, they continued their lessons with Highgarden’s maester, Lomys, as they did in every Keep. During their second day, Jon asked the implications of an agreement such as the one Lady Olenna had tried to get. While from the outside,
there were definite benefits—such as ease of distribution and having a trusted individual sell the moss to their own people—the current circumstances saw one major drawback. The Tyrell’s would have gained considerable power over price. Since the Reach was his only potential buyer they’d have a lot of sway, because Jon would lose his only source of income should he simply refuse to sell to them. While the Reach could easily return to purchasing wood, Jon couldn’t so easily find another buyer to make up the difference. He could, theoretically, just ignore the edict and sell to willing individual Houses, but that act would harm his reputation and win the ire of a Great House.

The moss may be valuable and save money, but not an astronomical amount and if one could afford to, they were usually willing to pay more for a similar product to slight a seller they disliked. The Highborn, in particular, didn’t forget a promise broken nor forgive feuds—even after many generations. Especially not if the perpetrator was a bastard.

Hate was a lesson quickly learned and hard to shake. Jon's name proved as much.

All the information made Jon’s head spin. He’d found a new appreciation for Maesters and hoped the one sent to the Moat was half as intelligent as Lomys.

Jon thanked all the gods that he hadn’t agreed, and also found himself regretting the twenty-year contract he’d suggested to out of panic of being refused completely. Regardless, he’d given his word and was serious about upholding the vow. While the Northerners disliked the South, they’d still expect one of their own to uphold an oath.

After all, Jon’s future was based on the Pact of Ice and Fire, which the Northmen faithfully honored despite what the Targarenys had done to them.

His letter to Dany had explained everything and stressed the importance of discussing the matter with Lord Arryn.

“Thank you,” he murmured to Domeric, after that lesson as they made their way to the guest dining hall. “Had you not interrupted, I’d likely have agreed.”

“A strong ally benefits me more than a weak one—and I have nothing to offer the Tyrells,” Dom responded with no inflection. Jon knew Domeric had only aided him out of self-interest—he didn’t want to delude himself into attaching emotional motives onto Dom’s actions—but the intent didn’t matter. Jon was grateful for the outcome.

“I know, and I’m thankful regardless. I’ll try to stay on the side that benefits you, Dom.”

The older boy stopped walking and stared down at him, and was it any other man Jon would swear he was surprised. “You do know, don’t you?” Dom mused, before turning away, “And yet here you are.” Their trip to the dining hall was silent. Jon didn’t try to understand the older boy—he doubted anyone really could.

After the noon meal, they got into the habit of visiting Lord Willas. Jon had given the man Oberyn’s letter, and then they usually spent a few hours discussing Willas’s breeding tactics, either in his library or in the stables, kennels, and aviary. The animals the Tyrell heir bred truly were impressive—the horses large and sleek, the hounds stocky with muscled, and the hawks shinned with a healthy gloss. Fully grown, these birds were nearly the size of the infant fire hawk he’d seen in Braavos, and Willas grew excited indeed when Jon told him of the experience.

The sailor from the Summer Isles, Xhobar, had not told him false—no man had ever tamed a fire hawk. While normal wild hawks eventually acclimated to their new environments and learned to trust their trainers, a captured fire hawk struggled until it either escaped or died. The most talented
breeders in the realms debated over the behaviour.

According to Willas, there were tales of mysticism attached to the raptors, likely spawned from their uniqueness. A popular tale was that the birds had been the abused experiment of the dragonlords, and that when the slaves who’d founded Braavos had escaped, they’d brought the hawks with them. Just like how the Braavosi refused to ever be made slaves again, so too did the fire hawks choose death over chains. Others popular stories said they actually came from the highest mountains of the Vale or maybe even farther north, all the way past the Wall, where even men have yet to walk. They were so large because only the strongest of them managed to cross the sea, and they accepted no chains because not even nature could master them.

“And still others say that the fire hawk is the result of mating between the two—the steadfast birds of the icy peaks and the passionate creatures of volcanic lands. That they’ve magic within them. A fanciful tales,” Willas murmured on the fourth day, as they, alongside six guards, stood in the field behind Highgarden and watched one of his hawks dive for prey. Lady Margaery, who loved to hawk and thus had come with them alongside her septa and a female companion, raised her leather covered fist and whistled loudly. The grey bird raised its head and took flight, heading towards them with the speed of an arrow. A scant meter away it spread its massive wings, slowed its descent, and landed elegantly upon her forearm. She didn’t flinch, only brought it close and murmured praises.

“I like that story best,” she murmured, stroking the hawk’s chest gently. “It’s terribly romantic—two magic creatures from across the realms, separated by the sea, finding each other despite all odds. And together they created something that no man can conquer.”

“They’re only birds, my dear,” Willas said, gently but firmly. She shot him an exasperated look but didn’t refute it. Despite living in the land of stories, the eldest Tyrell had little patience for anything fanciful. “Like all animals, one day someone will uncover the secret to training them. The Fire Hawk can’t elude us forever.”

“In Jhala, we have stories of wild things that are not tamed. They wait for one of same blood. They wait for companion.”

Suddenly, all Jon could see was seeing a massive city in the early dawn...as he soared above it, dancing with the clouds. I won’t fall—I have wings. Jon shivered and frowned, rubbing his hand over an arm suddenly covered by goosebumps.

What…?

“A shame I didn’t see the fire hawk,” Domeric murmured. “I could have shared my observations with you. I’ve always had an interest in breeding.”

Jon, distracted from the odd image, shot Dom a skeptical look—the older boy had mentioned no such thing. Dom only smiled before continuing his discussion with Willas.

When they returned from their outings with Lord Willas, he and Dom had dinner before making their way to the training yard. The Knights and castle guard trained in the mornings and afternoons, and Jon didn’t want to get in their way, so they save practice for the evenings.

“I didn’t know you had an interest in breeding,” Dom noted as they made their way to their rooms to change. “You’ve been asking Lord Willas a lot of detailed questions about it.

“I’ve no more interest than you,” Jon replied, dryly. Domeric didn’t dispute the claim. “Just doing some research.”
On the fifth day, an hour after dinner, he and Domeric hung back against the white walls of the training yard and watched Ser Garlan sparing against four other knights. Jon was impressed with the man’s skill: the second Tyrell brother ran circles around his opponents with a boyish laugh. As far as Jon could tell, none of his opponents were holding back as he’d—shamefully—done with Robb. Garlan was just a supremely gifted swordsman, and while Jon knew his own skills were currently no match for the knight, he itched to challenge the man to a duel.

“I train for war,” Garlan revealed afterward, when Domeric asked why he’d not participated at the tourney. “For real battle. It’s my younger brother Loras who seeks glory. He’s at King’s Landing, squiring for Renly Baratheon and no doubt amassing a gallery of fawning maidens.”

Jon felt a pang of—something, at that news. He looked up at the handsome Garlan, with his artful curls and amber eyes. Thought of pretty Margaery and dignified Willas and even of Lord Mace, who—despite his current girth—shared his children’s features. With a strange discomfort in his belly, Jon wondered if Daenerys was one of the maidens that was…fawning over Loras Tyrell. He knew she was frustrated by the frigid state between Lord Stannis and his brother, and would no doubt seek to alter it. This would put her in Loras’s path often, wouldn’t it?

By all the gods, he couldn’t recall if she’d ever mentioned anything specific about Loras in her letters. She would have, had he really been so impressive, wouldn’t she? She certainly talks about Jaime Lannister enough.

“Jon?”

He looked up, blinking to see both older boys staring at him expectantly. “Sorry, I was…thinking of the moss.”

“You’re a dutiful lad,” Garlan said, real praise in his tone—or really good manners. “My father may not have been happy that he didn’t get exactly what he wanted, but I know that my grandmother was impressed—though grudgingly. It’s a rare praise, you know—she’s called the Queen of Thrones for good reason, and not even family escapes her pricks.”

Jon was surprised at that. “Impressed—but, she seemed angry…?”

Garlan grinned, twirling his sword merrily. “She’ll never let it show, but grandmama enjoys nothing more than wits and those that have them. She says the competition keeps her young.”

A tight knot that had formed in his throat since the agreement seemed to loosen. Not even his trip to the weirwoods—the massive, magnificent trees sitting before a small pond—had managed to calm him completely. He was here to make allies, not annoy the de facto head of a Great House by wanting more—by showing them he was a greedy, ungrateful bastard. He knew, logically, that he’d made the best choice for his House, but insecurity had plagued him more and more with each of Lady Olenna’s cutting comments. He knew how even small things could lead to animosity, and thwarting their interest was no small thing. He’d been sure the Lady Olenna disliked him now and would have her revenge somehow, so Garlan’s words were more than surprising.

But then, not every woman is Lady Catelyn.

Jon pushed the bitter thought away.

“Come now, show me this bow I’ve been hearing so much about,” Garlan motioned to the bow Jon had strapped over his shoulder. The Stark and Targaryen sigil were covered, on Oberyn’s recommendation, but that was fine with Jon—it was enough that he knew they were there. Garlan’s voice turned wry. “I had friends in the tourney, some of them squires, and they had much to say
about their loss. It’s no surprise, I said, he’s Oberyn Martell’s squire. Even we Tyrells can’t deny the Prince’s prowess.”

Once again Jon was reminded by just how impressive it was that Oberyn had chosen him, and he couldn’t help the proud grin that bloomed on his lips.

“Aye, if you honor me with a duel, my lord.”

“Oh ho,” Garlan smiled. “A swordsman as well, Jon Snow? Come on then, show me your mettle.”

And so they spared before Domeric and all the gathered knights. Jon lost, of course—but he lasted long enough and scored enough hits to earn genuine praise from Garlan and the observing knights. Syrio’s water dance gave him an edge against Garlan’s more traditional technique, and Jon—begrudgingly—thanked his old teacher for all those hours of torture.

He wished Syrio’s current students luck.

“A swordsman indeed! They say your father is talented as well—that in battle he cut down dozens of knights. Did Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, not also fall to Lord Stark’s sword? You have your father’s skill, Jon Snow.”

His father had actually called Ser Dayne the best swordsman he’d ever seen, and attributed his victory to Lord Reed. Jon didn’t mention this, of course—he was too busy flushing with praise, his answering smile open and honest.

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It was their eighth and last night in Highgarden—already, they’d stayed two days longer than planned—and Jon had been on his way to the weirwoods. He didn’t know when he’d next be in the presence of a weirwood, and wanted to soak up the comfort they provided. His motive, he did know. What he didn’t know was how he’d ended up flanked by Lady Olenna and her granddaughter. They’d appeared in his path, apparently on the way to the Sept to pray as they did every night—strange that Jon hadn’t encountered them before—and Lady Olenna had all but ordered him to accompany them. Well, them and their two guards, who kept their distance behind the trio.

“Have you enjoyed Highgarden?” Margaery asked, her arm threaded through his, smiling prettily. They were the same age and about the same height. She never seemed to have a qualm about touching him as she would any lording, never treating him differently nor acknowledging his birth. Had it been any other girl, Jon would just think her kind—or rebellious—but this was the favored granddaughter of Olenna Tyrell. Like with Domeric, he could only guess which words were genuine.

Part of him wondered if he was being too judgemental, and she was exactly as she seemed. The rest called him a fool for it.

“Yes, my lady. It’s beautiful. You’ve been more than gracious hosts.” Were they at the sept yet? Gods, why were they walking so slowly? And Lady Olenna’s meandering gait didn’t fool him; once while at the training yard, he’d seen her marching through the columned outdoor hallways with the vigor of a man in his prime.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?” she squeezed his arms tighter, beaming, and he felt his already weak smile faltering in response. Was it strange just how uncomfortable her proximity made him? He thought of Dany and felt strange—as if he were doing something dishonorable. “Highgarden is the most magnificent castle in the seven kingdoms, so say all the songs.”
“Magnificent is just the word I thought when I first saw it, my lady,” he responded, unable to keep his tone even as he recalled the less than charitable thoughts he’d had. If she noticed the hint of sarcasm, she didn’t reply.

“I hear that only Summerhall was comparable. I admit, like any girl I grew up on stories of the royal family—the past one, of course—and their princes and knights and maidens. Oh,” she looked away, blushing. “You must think me foolish, to be so enamored by stories.”

No more than Sansa, he thought. But he didn’t really have a place to judge—Jon, too, had grown up idolizing the stories of old Targaryen knights and their dragons. As a young boy after a particularity brutal conflict with Theon, he’d once thought that if he had three dragons then no one would ever dare to treat him badly again. A stupid wish.

“No, my lady,” he quickly said, realizing he’d been quiet too long and she’d begun to frown. “Everyone enjoys stories.”

“My family supported the Targaryens, you know. We swore fealty to the royal family, and oaths are sacred to us.” She smiled guilelessly in response to Jon’s odd look.

“Everyone swore fealty,” was all he said, frowning. Was she insinuating that the loyalty still existed? He looked at lady Olenna, but she didn’t seem concerned with her granddaughter’s words.

“Of course,” she continued quickly, “My father was ever so grateful that your father and his Grace liberated us. He says that it was so difficult, fighting for tyranny, but an oath is an oath, do you not agree?”

Jon nodded. “Oathbreakers are cursed in the eyes of the old gods, my lady.”

“Well, I don’t know much of the old gods, if you’d excuse my ignorance, but I hear that you spend every evening in the godswood. You are a devoted follower, yes?”

Jon nodded again, growing suspicious—or was she was just being polite? “I was raised in my lord Father’s beliefs, my lady. These months away from a weirwood have been a challenge.”

“Why, I imagine so! I cannot think what I would do, were I unable to visit a sept every night. You must feel so discomforted in the south.”

Jon paused at that—yes, he was. Hadn’t he thought himself how he could only truly breath under the weirwood. Highgarden, for all its other stresses, was at least had that. Jon rather thought he could sleep better here just because of knowing the old gods were watching. “I am privileged to have been chosen to squire for the prince,” he said carefully, “but I do miss the North.”

Sometimes, anyway—and then there were the moments of discovering something new and wonderful about the world and how brilliant that exhilaration was. He wanted them both—he could understand, now, Oberyn’s need to travel.

She squeezed his arm again, and he looked back at her, “My heart weeps for you, Jon, and I hope you don’t think me too forward for saying so. I value honesty, as any lady does.” She smiled, shyly and looked up through her lashes. That strange discomfort arose again as she seemed to pull him even closer.

“You need not weep, my lady,” he said, a bit awkwardly as he subtly tried to increase the distance between them. Were all southern ladies so adverse to personal space? He didn’t know—she was the first to pay him any mind in their travels. “And honesty is a—good, quality.”
For some reason, her eyes narrowed, and he got the sense that he’d displeased her. Jon’s wariness only grew when she smiled again, brilliantly this time.

“Garlan tells me you are brave and skilled, someone who would fight on the side of justice. You will make a splendid knight, Jon!”

Her voice was awed, and she smiled at him as if he’d done something that especially amazed her. Jon only looked at her uncertainly—he didn’t understand why she was so impressed; she’d never actually seen him spar. Then he shot Lady Olenna a glance, who was meandering along, and thought he saw her sigh and roll her eyes. “I—thank you, my lady.” Even he could hear the painful discomfort in his tone; he didn’t like such—excessive—praise. Her smile faltered, and something like incredulous annoyance briefly clouded her eyes. Jon already guessed that she wasn’t being honest (Domeric was a much better liar)—about any of this—but he truly didn’t understand her motivation. What would this act actually earn her? The moss was already a sure thing, so the Tyrells had no need to flatter him. “Ser Garlan is kind, my lady. He’s an excellent—fighter.”

“He is that, at least,” Olenna murmured, bored.

“Had you lived during the Rebellion, your father would have been blessed to have you by his side. But, how fortunate that it ended before our births!” Margaery exclaimed. “Why, you and the Lady Daenerys would never have been betrothed. I know many who envy you—my brother Loras writes to me of the capital. Why, when that horrible business with the former queen occurred—” Jon’s stomach lurched unpleasantly at the reminder. “—he wanted to declare himself her champion! He says that the lady Daenerys is a beauty that will eclipse all others, and Loras is ever a gallant knight for any maiden in need. I hope I may meet her one day, that we may be friends. Poor girl, all alone and without family to guide her. You have met her, I’m sure. Why, all others must pale in comparison, if my brother speaks true.”

Jon stared at her as he processed the onslaught of words—and for a second, his mind completely blanked. Dany—a ‘beauty to eclipse all others’? He’d never really given it much thought. He knew, objectively, that Targaryens were beautiful, but all he’d ever been concerned with was what she was like—and how she would treat him and their children. Would she scorn him, blame him, rage at him? When all these speculations proved to be nothing but night terrors, and they’d begun exchanging letters, he’d never really pictured her. Just a faceless girl with silver hair that had passionate ideas and a hidden vulnerability—a girl he’d grown to care for and wanted to please. A blessed future he had to protect. The letters were real—tangible; the girl behind them less so. But…a ‘beauty to eclipse all others’? That was…daunting.

And Ser Loras wanted to be her champion? Ser Loras, who thought her so beautiful he’d even write to his sister about her? Ser Loras, with his ‘gallery of fawning maidens’?

“Your brother is indeed gallant, my lady,” he muttered, his strange annoyance at her brother bleeding into his tone. He cleared his throat. “But I’m afraid I don’t know what D—the lady Daenerys looks like—I’ve never met her.”

The annoyance was more noticeable on her features now, but he couldn’t imagine why his responses had elicited her ire. Was he truly that bad at communicating with girls? “Oh,” she said, and he thought her teeth were clenched. “So, you’ve never met her. I thought surely you must have, that you were loyal because of it. But you have not. I see.”

What an odd girl—and what loyalty had he displayed? He’d been trying hard not to mention Dany and let more people know that he cared for her. He was annoyed at himself for being such a poor actor and, partly, at Margaery for seeing through him. Still, she could tell him more about Ser Loras, at least. It would be more useful than the current discussion. Was he as skilled as Garlan? As
intelligent as Willas? As... eloquent as Margaery?

He opened his mouth to ask, but then Margaery said, “Oh, there’s the sept! It’s only matched in splendor by the Sept of Baelor and the Starry Sept, you know. Isn’t it glorious? When I pray before the gods I know that we truly honor them, as is proper. The Seven-Pointed Star shows me the true path.” She blushed again—she did that a lot. “It’s why I feel it is my privilege to aid those in need.”

The sept was a domed structure, so grand he’d seen it outside the castle, and covered in ivy as was the rest of the keep. Stained glass windows—an extravagant trapping—depicting the seven surrounded the structure. Another work of art—but Jon couldn’t stop the instinctual revulsion; he had no love for Lady Catelyn’s gods. While in the North he may be a symbol of dishonor, to the Seven he was an actual sin. The Northerners needed no book to rationalize their cruelty. “Yes, it’s... magnificent.”

This time when her smile faded, he saw her lips twist into a scowl before she ducked her head. Jon was so confused.

A sharp scoff interrupted them. “Yes, yes, everything magnificent and beautiful and completely inviting. Pretty decorations all around,” Olenna muttered, finally growing weary enough to include herself in the conversation. Jon’s tension only increased. “And my son, the Lord of decorations—he looks the part but lacks any real use.”

Jon could only blink at that, unsure what response she could possibly want from him.

“Grandmother!” Margaery exclaimed, “Why, father would be injured to hear you speak such.”

Jon rather thought Lord Mace was used to it.

“Jon Snow knows it’s true, don’t you, boy? Growing up with Eddard Stark, you know what a lord ought to be. I know my son doesn’t compare.”

Jon took a moment to think of his reply. “All men are different, my lady.”

“Yes, of course they are. It must be a comfort to have a lord like Ned Stark, who’s honest and true. One never has to look for daggers in the dark with him. Even in the south, he’s famed for his honor, and many a cynic would trust his word.”

Jon wanted to be proud, and he was, but most of him was wary of where she was headed. “I’ll pass on your kind words, my lady.”

She ignored him, continuing as if he hadn’t spoken. “I see Eddard Stark in you, Jon Snow. You may not have his name, but it’s more than colouring that you share.” Another praise—he was only growing warier. “When I insulted you, called you his shame, you defended your father’s honor rather than your own. A telling response. Completely ignoring my granddaughter’s efforts is telling as well, although you may just not have noticed.”

“Grandmother,” Margaery complained, closing her eyes.

Jon wasn’t sure exactly what his response told her, or what ‘efforts’ he’d ignored, and was having difficulty keeping up with the conversation. Too much subtext. “I endeavor to live up to my father’s values, my lady. My word is true.”

Again, ignored.

“But there’s more than that—a sharpness he lacks, although obviously not in all matters. Your father
wouldn’t take such care with his words—wouldn’t adapt nearly so well. He either would not know how to, or would protest the need and see it as deceitful. Honest to his core. But the North doesn’t exist outside of the North, Jon Snow. Maybe not even outside of your Winterfell. Honesty, honor, integrity—pretty on paper, and they’ll make men love you, but few battles fought honorably are won. It’s the honest men that lose their heads—and the shrewd live on. The Crone dotes on her clever children.”

Jon came to a halt, meeting her gaze, and no longer even noticing Margaery on his arm. “My lady, I don’t—”

“Who is your mother?”

Had they been walking, he’d have stumbled. As it was, he did flinch. Only Oberyn had ever so abruptly asked that question, and like it did then, it felt like a poker to the gut.

“I—I don’t, that is, my father never…” he couldn’t finish; his tongue felt too large in his mouth.

“Yes, it seems Ned Stark has told no one. I don’t believe the rumors that she was some tavern woman—honor is too strict in your father’s blood for that. The Lady Dayne, however—” again, Jon flinched and wished he hadn’t. Her eyes gleamed. “Ah, so you suspect her, then? Squiring for that loathsome man is suddenly more understandable—is that why lord Stark allows it, then? I suppose I can see it—in looks, Ned Stark is no champion. However, the Daynes are not known for their cleverness—a very honest lot, for being Dornish. Well, those of Starfall, anyway. Arthur Dayne was a knight in the truest sense.”

Yet he aided Rhaegar in kidnapping my aunt. Jon shied away from the thought—he may be Jon’s uncle.

“My lady, I don’t know what you seek, but I have no answer for you,” he said, a tad hard, having grown weary of this inquisition. “My father has told me nothing. Speculation is pointless.”

For a moment, she simple trailed her eyes over his face. “You are very right.” Then she stepped away. “Heed my words: honor is admirable, but clever boys survive.”

“I can be both,” he said—it came out challenging.

She smiled her old woman’s smile—wise with a hint of mocking for who were mere babes in her eyes. “I look forward to witnessing it. Now, these are old bones, and the hour is late. Come now Margaery, let’s say our prayers.”

“Of course,” the girl murmured, and Jon remembered that she was still on his arm only when she let go. She curtseyed, and he jerkily bowed to them both.

He watched as they disappeared into the Sept, and contemplatively made his way to the weirwoods. Sitting there under the branches of three trees made one, he stared at his reflection in the pond, the moonlight a bright candle that bleached him of color. At that moment, he was only a ghostly apparition, not Ned’s son with his dark hair and grey eyes. He could take on any colour—perhaps he was already starting to.

He was proud to be Ned’s son. But that’s not all he was, not all he wanted to be—and he didn’t know which side held more sway.

*****

“What a dullard!” Margaery complained as they made their way back to the family’s rooms, her
angry and scorn originating from a pricked pride. Olenna recalled the feeling, from when she’d been young and clumsy with her manipulations. “He should have been jumping through hoops for my praise, yet all he did was stand there and look at me as if I were the fool!”

“You’re used to fawning attention, Margaery, and overestimate your skills. I don’t remember raising a granddaughter who would let her confidence poison her.”

The girl blushed—a real one, for once—and scowled mutinously at Olenna.

“Maybe he’s like Loras! I even smiled at him and held his arm. Any other boy—especially a bastard—would have been weeping at my feet in gratitude.”

Olenna shot her a quelling look. “Your performance wouldn’t have won you the attention of a lowborn urchin—it was a pitiful affair. You’re young, I know, but have I taught you nothing of subtlety?”

The girl sagged for a moment, before remembering her posture—a lady was always presentable. “I tried my best, grandmamma.”

“Not all men will fall at your feet for a pretty smile and some empty praises—unlike the lot here, some actually have brains to make our lives difficult. They’re a woman’s cross to bear, those intelligent men.” Olenna exhaled, thinking of all they’d managed to learn. A successful week, in her books, although she still smarted from having lost the change to claim domination over that moss. “Having him here taught me much of how this alliance will go, at least. He is still unsure of his place, and we can get away with much before he learns himself. He’s a boy, yet; insecure and fearful. He bound himself for twenty-years for no good reason, and will stick to the agreement. He takes pride in his word—don’t all bastards want to make their fathers proud?”

“He did seem preoccupied with Lord Stark,” Margaery noted, some of the intellect Olenna prized shining through in spite of her wounded pride. “I thought he’d envy his trueborn kin because of it, but Willas says he speaks warmly of them. Garlan even seems to like him.”

“Your brother likes anyone who can twirl a stick,” Olenna says dryly.

“You like him, too,” her granddaughter noted, sly. “You gave him advice.”

Olenna sniffed. “It’s unladylike to make such outlandish claims, dearest.”

Margaery giggled. Olenna exhaled in a very put-upon manner.

“You attempts weren’t a complete failure—before you let your pride dominate,” Olenna murmured, ignoring how the girl wrinkled her nose. “A loyal one, this boy. Cares for his family, and takes his heathen gods too seriously besides. You heard him: ‘oathbreakers are cursed.’” She snorted dismissively. “If those boorish Martells plan to harm the Starks, the boy will protest, whatever good that will do. It was rather interesting how he seemed to expect me—weakly as he tried to hide it. Seems the viper is fond of his little squire enough to warn him, and perhaps the regard goes both ways. That has its own power when it comes to the boy’s future choices. Furthermore, his betrothed is a wild card—we’re not men, to underestimate the influence of one’s wife.”


Olenna released a wheezing laugh. “Not a stone—worse. An honorable man. They’re nightterrors, my dearest—they’d marry you if you managed to get compromised, but getting there is a challenge even for the gods. It would take much more than your skills to trap him.”
“As I said,” her granddaughter sniffed, ego smarting. “Dull.”

“They can be,” she agreed. “But a good lesson for you. There’s no shame in retreat, but there is in desperation. You’re a Tyrell—you make yourself pathetic for no man.” Olenna’s tone was hard. “If you cannot find a weakness, you revise your strategy or your target. That’s how women get, and keep, power in this land. The second you let a man play you for a fool, you’ve lost. Do you understand?”

“Yes, grandmother,” Margaery replied, sober. Her attempt might have failed, but she was smart and learned quickly. The girl’s lip trembled. “I’m sorry.”

Well, it seems she’d been too harsh. This would not do. Olenna tsksd reprovingly. “None of that now, it wasn’t just your skills, my dear. Things would have gone differently had he been more self-aware. The boy would likely never fathom that you were trying to capture his attention. Poor insecure child.”

Margaery’s mouth twisted in confusion. “What?”

Olenna just patted the girl’s cheek. “He’s a dullard, dearest.”

Margaery blinked, then began to giggle. Olenna’s thin lips stretched into a smile.

He wasn’t, but what did that matter in the face of her granddaughter’s joy? Olenna cared only about her family. The rest were pawns to use or players to outsmart.

As they made their way to the family’s suits, Olenna thought over the exchange. Ashara Dayne, was it? Hmm—was that where the boy got the slightly up tilted shape of his eyes and fullness of his lips? Was his pointed chin of Dayne blood, and his high cheekbones of Dornish origin? He was handsome enough to be a Dayne—but perhaps too much so. Olenna knew the importance of remembering faces.

She’d have to send a man south to make some inquiries. A passing fancy, most like, but Eddard Stark, too, was an honorable man. He shouldn’t have sent the boy south—if a secret was there. Nothing stayed hidden forever. And his son reminds me of the man I almost married.

Ironic, that Prince Daeron Targaryen had been Olenna’s first taste of a wounded pride.

*****

Dear Dany,

I know said my next letter would be from Horn Hill, but too much happened in Highgarden to wait. Domeric and I have been here eight days and will leave in the morning for House Tarly.

The Tyrell’s agreed to allow us to sell the moss in the Reach. At first, they tried to ensure that we only sold to them, and then they would sell to their bannermen. I almost agreed Dany, without knowing the consequences. Their maester later explained the repercussions to me, and I’ll let your own maester explain them to you, as it’s long and I don’t doubt he’d be better at it. To sum it, they’d have gotten a lot of control over us. I avoided it by noting how I couldn’t make such a deal without father’s permission, as I am yet Lord of Moat Cailin. However, I did agree to a twenty-year contract of that type to be signed after our marriage. I admit that I panicked when I offered. The Prince warned me that if I displeased them, they might sabotage us. Thinking back, I think I worried for nothing.

Dany, I know that Lord Stannis is busy, but we need to know what Lord Arryn’s thoughts are on the
moss. The more buyers we have, the less power the Tyrells have. The contract with the Reach is not ideal, but at least it provides proof that others are interested, and that may sway Lord Arryn is he is reluctant. I know the North is stubborn about change, and perhaps the Vale is the same. I’ve written to my uncle, and he’ll send the Tyrells a large shipment by years end so they may confirm for themselves that what I’ve said is true. If Lord Arryn is interested, we can do the same for the Vale.

Well, that’s all the business news. How have you been? Have you decided on a suitable punishment for Ser Jaime? I have no doubt it will be clever and exactly what he deserves.

Highgarden was interesting, Dany. Lady Olenna is the head of the House, as Oberyn told me. I admit I was skeptical at first—we have no such system in the North. But I understand now: she works in the shadows and it’s her son, Lord Mace, that outwardly makes the decisions. Speaking with her is a stressful experience, as you rarely know what her motive is. And her reputation as Queen of Thornes is well earned. Still, according to Ser Garlan, she doesn’t wish me ill, and during our last meeting she gave me advice. A complicated woman, if nothing else.

Domeric enjoyed speaking to lord Willas—or at least he enjoyed fostering good relations with the heir. Domeric has taught me what a really skilled liar looks like, and that’s a good lesson, at least. He also aided me during the negotiations: he prefers powerful friends. We should endeavor to stay on his good side, whichever side that is. Lord Willas is an expert breeder of horses, hounds, and hawks. His sister, Lady Margaery, accompanied us when we went hawking, and the birds are expertly trained to follow her commands. Lord Willas’s injury prevents him from taking part in most common activities expected of an heir, but he doesn’t allow it to embitter him. He sees the world clearly and works within its rules.

Ser Garlan is the second brother, and truly a talent with a sword. He regularly spars against three or four men and holds his own. He told me that his brother, Loras, has similar skill. You’ve likely met him—he’s Lord Renly’s squire. The lady Margaery speaks very fondly of him—she tells me that he writes her often from the capital. She was gracious, Dany, and generous when we spoke—the first highborn daughter to pay me so much attention. Is it the norm, in King’s Landing, to stand so close? You’ve likely spoken to many lords and knights and squires.

I look forward to your reply. Remain well.

Yours,

Jon.

Sixth Moon, 22nd Day

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“They call her the Rose of Highgarden, my lady,” Maryam informed her, taking a sip of her, ironically, rose tea. Dany pushed her own tea away, suddenly not liking the taste. “They say she’s lovely, and her face is matched by her sweet disposition.”

Dany was in the garden with her three friends, all of whom were recommended by Myra and through which she learned the gossip of the realm. She’d received Jon’s letter yesterday, six days after he’d sent it, and the little dragon was particularly interested in this Margaery Tyrell, who apparently stood very close to Dany’s betrothed. Jon had never spoken so much about another girl, not even his own sisters.

Dany didn’t like it.
“She apparently is very charitable, as well!” Helna noted. “Why, she aids the poor—directly! Can you imagine? I’d be much too frightened to speak with the lowborn myself.”

Dany felt an unpleasant churning in her stomach and pushed the tray of cakes away. Was she getting ill?

“You’re frightened of your own shadow,” Larys murmured, taking a bite of her honey cake and ignoring Helna’s pout. “But yes, they do say lady Margaery is one of the kindest girls in all the kingdoms. Lord Loras certainly boasts such to his Grace, and Lord Renly is only too eager to heap praise upon the girl.”

Dany thought of Loras Tyrell, a boy of thirteen who was, in fact, one of the most beautiful boys Dany had ever seen. The young princess was often in his presence, and he’d heap similar praised and extravagant compliments onto her. Dany liked being complimented—it made her feel nice, and it was certainly better than being insulted, as a lot of other boys tended to do. But she rather thought Loras was excessive—he’d once called her “a glorious star that outshines the moon” and is “more beautiful than the Maiden herself” and “more loving that the Mother in the heavens.” When she’d told the tale at dinner, Myra has snorted into her wine, Steffon had looked disgusted, and Stannis had sighed as if Loras were an idiot. She wrinkled her nose—hadn’t Loras even once promised to be her ‘devoted champion against evil’? With all that, Dany didn’t really believe the weight of his praises.

Besides, she didn’t really like him much. Not only did he seem to do nothing of substance besides dress pretty and occasionally fight for their entertainment, but he his conversation was made up of praises, boasts, and talk of glory. Dany had been raised by cousin Stannis—she didn’t have much interest in people who were so frivolous. Unfortunately, she was around him quite often—Dany was still trying her best to get Stannis and Renly to dine together, but Renly would only agree if Stannis sent the invitation personally, and Stannis refused to do it! Dany was very annoyed at them both, but she wouldn’t give up! She’d learn why there was animosity between them and fix it; she knew her cousin would like to know his brother. Myra said so.

“Useless,” Maryam scoffed, and Dany blinked, quickly recalling what they’d been talking about. “The king has three children, two of them sons. The Tyrells won’t waste their prized daughter without the promise of a little rose on the throne.”

“Lucky girl—she should marry some handsome Tyrell bannerman,” Larys came closer, smirking. “I shudder to think of what it’s like to bed—” she cleared her throat with a glance at Dany. “—I mean wed, his ‘Grace’.”

“Larys!” Maryam scolded, while Helna giggled into her palm. Dany couldn’t help her own snort of amusement, although she sensed that two older girls—Larys was fourteen and Maryam fifteen—were alluding to something else.

“She’s very devout as well,” Helna murmured, popping a grape into her mouth. “Lady Margaery. She prays every day. Where does she find the time?”

“Jon doesn’t like the Seven!” Dany rushed out, triumphant. The others stared at her, and the silence stretched out uncomfortably as they glanced at each other. Dany felt her cheeks flush and quickly took a sip of the not-good tea. She cleared her throat. “That is—um—the lady Margary sounds lovely.”

She really did—Dany would like to be friends with someone who actually cared about the lowborn. She liked Maryam, Helna, and Larys—they were intelligent and amusing, but they only cared for highborn gossip. Maybe with Margaery, she could talk about the orphans and how she was trying to help them—as no one else seemed to understand why she wanted to!
Yes, Margaery sounded nice. And it wasn’t surprising that the other girl had seen what a kind and interesting boy Jon was. Dany would just prefer that the other girl didn’t stand so close to her betrothed.

*It’s only good manners. Jon’s mine.*

*****

Dear Jon,

I know you say that you regret the contract, and Maester Cressen has told me all about it, but let’s simply rejoice in the fact that you have formed a bond with a Great House! It’s no small achievement, Jon, nor is discovering this moss, so rejoice. We need not be rich, just comfortable enough to care for our people, and you’ve achieved that. Thank you, Jon. I’ve spoken to my cousin, and he’ll set up a meeting with Lord Arryn. The two are friendly, and my cousin has assured me Lord Arryn will see the merit of this plan. He’ll agree, you’ll see, and then the Tyrells won’t be able to tell us what to do, contract or no.

Give lord Dommie my thanks for his aid. And yes, let’s not fall behind his expectations—he, too, seems to be a useful companion.

I’m sorry it took me so long, but things have been so busy here. Myra is expecting again! We’re all overjoyed, cousin Stannis especially. (I’m happy of course, but I really hope the next child has Myra’s hair! Then it’ll look like me.) Cousin Stannis has been spending much of his free time with Myra—they don’t get much time alone ever since we came back from Dragonstone. I worry about my cousin—he seems to be driving himself ragged. We still have not found another smith for the aluminum, and the orders are piling up. ‘The Iron Bank always gets paid’, Cressen has told me, and I very much dislike all of them!

Jaime is loving his punishment. You’ll read more in the previous letter I wrote.

The Tyrells sound so interesting—Lady Olenna most of all! I’m glad she was kind to you, in her own way. I’d love to know how she became the head of her family, especially in the Reach which is so traditional and faithful to the Seven. I won’t need the lesson personally—we’re sharing power, you see—but it would be good to know.

I wonder if she’s taught the Lady Margaery. I’ve heard so much about her. She truly seems like a wonderful person. Perhaps when we’re married, we can invite her and her husband for a visit, or go and visit them. Did you know that she’s very, very devoted to the Seven?

I have met lord Loras. I’m around quite a bit, since I’m still trying to find out why lord Renly and cousin Stannis are so mean to each other, and Lord Renly is being much more forthcoming than my stubborn cousin. Lord Loras is indeed very talented, and very handsome—he no doubt shares his appearance with lady Margaery, who I hear is a beauty and talented besides. Lord Loras and Lord Renly seem to think so—I asked about her, and they told me of her kindness and generosity. Was she as impressive as they say, Jon? You spoke very highly of her—you’ve never spoken about another girl before. Did you like her very much?

I hope House Tarly is a success as well! Lord Randyll is said to be a very traditional man, so good luck to you.

Love,

Dany.
The largest room of the orphanage was used as a hall for eating, sleeping a learning. It was covered with mismatched tables, chairs, and pillows. Three times a week the children pushed the furniture against the walls to make room for Jaime’s lessons. In the far corner, Daenerys sat with her gaggle of young and female urchins, reading them stories or watching the boys learn. Sometimes, they would all sit there and nibble at cakes and she’d ask them various questions about the city—the older ones knew quite a bit. Jaime couldn’t fathom why she had so much interest in King’s Landing—the smallfolk had dull, pathetic lives, as far as he knew. He may have saved them all, but that didn’t mean he was interested in being friendly.

“Again,” Jaime barked, hands folded across his chest as he walked through the pack of urchins with their wooden swords.

There were groans, but the boys obediently got into position to spar once more. “Pathetic, most of you,” he sneered, ignoring the hostile looks. “But not completely useless.” He glanced at Gavin, who, to his surprise and irritation, had turned out to be a very obedient and dutiful student. Oh, the urchin still sneered as though he had a right to look at a highborn knight like that—let alone a Lannister—but when Jaime gave instruction, he listened carefully.

It was irritating as all hells, how attentive the boy was. Part of Jaime wanted him to scoff and protest and be difficult—at least then he’d have an excuse to stop teaching him. Not even Daenerys—with her wrinkled noses and annoyed frowns when he was ‘too mean to them’—could fault him for that. But he’d been teaching this ever-growing pack of sewer rats for over a month now, and Gavin showed no sign of earning a rightful dismissal.

Could nothing in his life go right?

Worse, while Gavin did not have any gods-given talent with a sword—Jaime could point out at least two others that were better—he was dedicated and learned quickly. The others also listened to him, which irritated Jaime when they followed the boy’s orders over his own. Jaime was petty enough to wish the boy was awful at it all. He was also petty enough to resent just how much joy learning seemed to give the kid: only when sparing with one of the other boys did he look truly self-assured. Every other time Gavin looked as if the world were about to throw a dagger at him, and he must always be ready with his acrid tongue and bluster. But when he won a duel his smile would cover half his face and he’d whoop with untainted happiness. Even his opponent would smile in return and accept the friendly hand.

The kid lived in swears, was skinny as all hells, and had to cover himself in shit to avoid a roving hand. How was he so much brighter than a highborn knight? Why was he doing this with the stupid, foolish hope of protecting others? Why did Jaime loath to think of the day this kid realized the sword was nothing more than a tool for murder.

Jaime hadn’t felt the simple joy of sparing just to spar for what felt like years. Hadn’t had an idealized view of it for longer than that. Perhaps not since he was this boys age, before the sword had become a status symbol. Hells, but he’d grown into a jaded man, hadn’t he? To be jealous of a child’s joy.

“I wan’ ta learn, too.”

Jaime looked away from the boys and turned. He tipped his chin down, down, down to see one of the girls—a ratty thing of about eight, with stringy black hair and bare feet—staring up at him. Her
mouth was closed tightly, and her fists were clenched at her sides. She could only meet his gaze for a moment before her own flickered away.

The sound of wood on wood behind him ceased. “You’re a girl, Lanna!” one of the urchin shouted. “You can’t fight.”

“Maybe she’s don’t know she’s a girl!” one laughed.

“Can’t tell under all that hair!” Another jeered.

Laughter and mocking followed. Amid the cries he heard Gavin telling them to shut up, but the idiots were too far gone with the apparent hilarity of a girl with a sword. Jaime looked at the ceiling, feeling his patience dwindling. Seven hells, how did he get here?

“I can too fight!” the girl snapped, scowling at the boys, her face red and splotchy from embarrassment. Jaime wondered if she’d cry soon. “I’m faster than all ‘o you! No one’s ever caught me down at the markets!”

“Ohhh,” a couple of the kids said, enjoying the scene.

From one of the side tables a septa raised her head and ordered, “Lanna, sit down this instance! And what was that about markets?”

“Yeah Lanna, sit down!” one of the kids jeered, twirling his sword.

The boys kept mocking, and Daenerys and the others were watching. The princess just tilted her head at Jaime. He shot her a pointed look, brow raised, but Daenerys just shrugged. Wonderful, of course she’d leave this up to him. The gall of the girl, using him for free labor and forcing him to buy food for these sewer rates, and yet only giving him guide when it suited her. Seven hells, he missed drinking.

“You don’t need to learn nothing,” Gavin said, stepping forward. “That’s why we’re learning—so none of you are goin’ ta get hurt anymore.”

“You’re not always goin’ ta be around, Gavin,” she said, mouth twisted mulishly. The boy opened his, but she cut in quickly. “I can’t see why I can’t learn—I ain’t no highborn girl with frilly dresses. I can beat any o’ you with a stick!”

“You’ll just get hurt!” Gavin protested.

“So, what. It’s not fair that only you get ta learn!”

A memory:

“Trade clothes with me, Jaime, please! Just for the afternoon.”

“Cersei, mother said—”

“She’ll never know—come on, Jaime, it’s not fair. I like sparing, too, and the Master-at-arms said I was really good when he thought I was you.”

“If father finds out—”

“He won’t! Please, Jaime, please. I feel like I’m suffocating.”

They’d been seven at the time—mere months before their mother passed. It was the last time they’d
switch before Joanna Lannister had caught them. Cersei was never allowed to spar again, and he remembered her growing meaner and meaner. Thinking back, he’d always assumed her changes had begun when their mother died…but maybe it was earlier. Maybe it was because the more she’d grown, the more the world had forbidden her from acting as she really wanted to. Guilt gnawed at the pit of his stomach. Had he ever really been able to do anything for her? If he had, could he have stopped her from turning into a woman that paraded a little girl naked before the court?

But it was too late for these thoughts, wasn’t it?

“I won’t go easy on you,” Jaime warned, and silenced the argument between Gavin and Lanna. “If you want to lean, you’ll do it with the rest of them.” They all stared at him, shocked. Her eyes were huge and doubtful, like she thought it was some trick. Jaime realized she’d likely never expected him to agree—but her pride had pushed her into asking, if only to prove to herself that she wasn’t afraid of him. The pride of an orphan girl. Where did she get it, he wondered, she who had nothing.

Jaime jerked his chin at the pile of wooden swords. “Go get one, then pair with him,” he pointed at Gavin. Like he’d say the kid's name.

The other boys exchanged surprised looks, but they stopped they didn’t protest and stopped laughing. Apparently, his agreement was enough for them. Boys were always predictable.

“I can’t hit her!” Gavin said, of course being the only one to protest, as Lanna scurried off to get the sword. “She’s a girl.”

Jaime shrugged, smiling nastily. “Then you’ll get hit.”

Gavin looked furious. He turned his head to look towards Daenerys, something hopeful on his face. The girl met his eyes and, as she’d done to Jaime, shrugged. Then she turned back to her stories, to the gratitude of the youngest children who’d been tugging on her dress impatiently. Gavin scowled at her, muttering under his breath. Jaime just smirked at him, smug.

“You’re just doing this ‘cause you hate me,” Gavin accused.

Jaime sneered. “Not everything’s about you, urchin. Girl, boy, what does that matter to me? Not like I’m getting paid for this indignity.” He raised his voice and pointedly looked in Daenerys’s direction, but the girl ignored him and kept reading. Frustrating chit. He turned back to Gavin, jerking his chin to the urchin girl. “And she’s right, you know—you can’t protect them forever. No matter how much you want to.”

The last sentence was delivered with more bitterness than he’d intended. Gavin’s scowl faded, and surprise drew his brows together. Jaime turned away, memories of two queens and the daughter of one painting his thought. He pushed the images away.

The excited girl returned with her sword and took up her spot opposite Gavin, who looked completely out of his depth. Oh, Jaime would be sure to pair them up all the time.

He thought of Cersei during the lesson—a different Cersei, untainted by anger and bitterness, a Cersei who’d been allowed to learn and ride and decide what she to do. One who hadn’t been sold to a man like Robert. He wondered if things would have turned out differently. If she’d have been content to simply go away with him, and they could have just been two people in a foreign land—happy.

It was too late for that dream now. Perhaps it had never been possible anyway—his sister had always wanted to be queen. She wasn’t the woman of his deepest dreams, and he wasn’t that man either.
Everything was too different.

The endless despair was right there, just under the surface. He pushed it back and turned his attention to the urchins. At least they gave him something to do. Eventually, two more girls joined—the oldest ones, who would soon be forced out did they not join the septas. Whores in the making, in this city. He taught them without protest, ignoring how Daenerys would smile with something like pride. As if he needed her validation.

It was only months later that he realized that, for the first time in years, he had a purpose that didn’t make him feel like he was drowning in filth.

Chapter End Notes

I made the fire hawk stuff up. Why not have fun with it, I thought.
Ta-Da! :D

Please note that chapter has mentions of child abuse in the Horn Hill scenes, so read with caution.

In a way, Lord Randyll Tarly reminded Jon of Lord Stannis. He was a man of simple dress, a balding head, and a short greying beard. He also had a rigid disposition and a widespread reputation of being one of the keenest military minds in Westeros. During the Rebellion, only Lord Randyll had ever successfully repelled Robert Baratheon’s forces. Like Lord Stannis, Randyll was taller than Jon and looked down at him with a grim set to his mouth, although he was slim where Lord Stannis was stocky, and shorter than the Lord of Dragonstone by at least a head. Like Lord Stannis, Randyll made Jon uncomfortable and wary during their first meeting.

There the similarities ended.

While Jon’s view of Stannis had warmed considerably during the month they’d spent traveling from White Harbor to Winterfell, his perception of Lord Randyll remained the same even a full two weeks into their stay at Horn Hill.

An implacable man, with strict views of men and women, and the roles the gods assigned them.

It didn’t help that lord Randyll openly scorned Jon, to the point that he would pointedly not speak to him when they dined every evening. But then, he rarely spoke at all, and dinners were a grim, quiet affair. Jon thought this was a common occurrence, and not a result of their presence.

Oberyn seemed to be itching to leave. Although he hadn’t yet, making Jon question if there was something of particular interest at Horn Hill. And if it had anything to do with how the Lord Randyll seemed to be the antithesis of Lord Mace—militarily skilled, sharp of mind, and totally in control of his Household. Highgarden and Horn Hill were both magnificent castles, but the families that governed them couldn’t be more different.

Compared to Lord Mace’s treatment of his children—warm, indulgent—Randyll Tarly spoke briskly and impatiently; as if the very act of moving his mouth to form words were too much of a waste. Toward his wife and three daughters, the man was chillingly distant and polite. They responded quietly in turn and kept their eyes down, rarely making conversation at dinner. Only towards his young son, Dickon—gods, what an unfortunate name—did Jon ever sense a hint of approval; and even then, it was heavily weighted by expectation. As if Lord Randyll’s regard was conditional and his youngest son barely met the requirements.

His eldest son didn’t come close.

The first time he’d heard Lord Randyll speak to Samwell Tarly was the day they’d arrive at Horn Hill, having met Oberyn at the nearby village. Lord Randyll had stood with his family in their parlor, and after greeting them he’d turned to Sam and ordered, “Introduce yourself.” Such simple words,
and yet the revulsion in the man’s eyes and the scornful twist to his lips had made Jon’s stomach lurch.

Jon didn’t think anyone had ever even looked at him with such loathing—and he was bastard born. By the Old Gods, even Lady Catelyn at her most hateful couldn’t compare to the pure vitriol this man emitted when speaking to his eldest. The way Oberyn’s lips had tilted down, and the way Domeric had subtly lifted his eyebrow in interest, let Jon know that they, too, noted the tone.

As if anyone could miss it.

Jon had noted, of course, that Sam was fat, with almost more width than height. His black hair hung in an awkward cut over his face, and his eyes, nose, and lips were made tiny by the girth of his moon-shaped face. Furthermore, unlike young Dickon, a boy a seven, who stood proud and bordering on arrogant—common, in a highborn son—Sam gazed at them with brows raised high and lips downturned—the picture of uncertainty. Jon saw how the boy’s soft, green velvet clothing contrasted the simple, almost spartan brown tunic worn by Lord Randyll.

Sam’s whole body depicted him as someone who loved to eat, who sat still for long periods, and who rarely, if ever, held a weapon. All qualities his father despised. To make matters worse, in his father’s presence Sam seemed to often be on the verge of tears, a craven display which no doubt further alienated man and boy. The rest of Sam’s qualities were equally repulsive, in his father’s eyes.

When Jon had first spoken to him, the next morning at their lessons with the Maester, Sam had weakly admitted that he had no head for battle—he was scared of getting hurt. Jon had been shocked by Sam’s outright admittance of his cowardice—he knew of no other man that would have been so honest. War was glorious, battle was a way to prove yourself, and those that died fighting were to be honored—while those that fled brought only shame to their family. That was the way of things, in Westeros: that was what governed how men behaved. Yet Samwell—quiet, fearful Sam—eschewed it all. In a way, Jon thought that was Sam, by admitting his fear, had his own strange bravery.

Of course, Samwell was the heir to a rich, powerful House. He was not bound by the same chains as other men.

Still, Sam’s honesty was rather admirable to Jon, who could not even speak his own name without shame. One could say that being a known craven was even worse than being a bastard, in a way—a bastard could rise up in the world, as Jon was learning, while a coward was scorned forever. In Horn Hill, this held especially true, if even a bond of blood couldn’t temper Lord Randyll’s hatred.

Or perhaps it was that very bond that fanned the flames. Having a son such as Sam wouldn’t be easy on a Lord’s pride, especially not someone like Randyll Tarly. Others laughed at the Tarlys, Jon was sure—he knew the cruelty of men.

During that first week, Jon and Sam grew to be something like friends, all begun when Sam, encouraged by Jon’s willingness to speak with him, began to join him during his daily activities.

“You know I’m a bastard, don’t you, my lord?” Jon asked, a bit wary. He’d found Samwell Tarly outside his room, shyly offering to accompany Jon to morning lessons.

Sam was startled. “I—well, yes…but I don’t have any companions my age, and I thought maybe you also…” Sam wilted. “I’m sorry, I know its very insensitive of me.”

“No,” Jon replied quickly. “I’d like the company.”
Samwell brightened immediately, small eyes shining.

At first, Jon had been driven by pity for the boy; Jon knew what loneliness felt like. Despite Robb’s acceptance, he’d felt a singular sense of isolation in Winterfell since the first time a young Sansa had introduced him as “my half-brother” to a group of visiting children. He imagined that Sam, who was so at odds with his father, probably also never felt comfortable at Horn Hill. Plus, a boy like him wouldn’t be popular with others his age. Jon doubted they’d be true friends.

He was wrong.

After a few days in Sam company, he’d found that what the heir lacked in bravery he made up for in intellect. Sometimes during their lessons, Sam would get so enthused that he’d take over for the Maester, who would just sigh and sit down while Sam taught the lesson himself. Sam’s excitement made it more engaging, Jon would give him that. Apparently, he’d already memorized knowledge years above his age, and only joined them for the company. Seeing that Sam was only a few months Jon’s elder, the boy’s knowledge was impressive indeed, and Jon grew to simply enjoy speaking with Sam about various things. Sam knew more about Westeros and its regions than some natives, Jon was sure. And he often had insightful observations about how this or that could be improved, if only someone were willing. Even Domeric—who rarely said a word to Sam—had noted his intellect.

Sam had flushed and smiled so happily, so joyfully, that he’d grown tearful. He’d taken what Jon knew to be a simple observation as the highest praise. Which, if Jon thought about it, it likely was: Dom didn’t have anything to gain, nor was he simply trying to be kind, so his words had been completely honest. A genuine compliment from Domeric Bolton: an impressive achievement, that.

Sam was rarely praised for anything, they learned, and especially not for his knowledge. While intellect was prized in an heir, Lord Randyll had once grown so thunderous when Sam had, years earlier, expressed interest in being a Maester, that any display of his knowledge was harshly criticized.

As were all of his other interests. Sam liked to read, to help the cooks and eat their work, and listen to music. “And to dance—I like to dance, too,” he’d cheerfully revealed on the third day. “Sometimes, my sister Talla will join me. Never in father’s presence, of course.” He wilted. “He disapproves if my siblings spend too much time with me. I think, mayhap, he’s worried they’ll catch my disposition,” Sam weakly joked. Then his eyes had widened in fear, and he’d quickly said. “You won’t though, I swear it! It—it was a jest…”

“I know, Sam,” Jon had replied, quiet but sincere. Sam’s insecurity was painfully familiar—although Jon doubted he’d ever been so awkward with people. He’d smiled, “Worry not, should I start to feel a chill and sudden desire to cry, I’ll distance myself immediately.”

It took a moment of Sam only blinking before he’d gotten the jest. Then the fat boy had grinned and began to laugh. “You’re funny, Jon!” His smile had shifted into something painfully grateful. “No one’s ever been so nice to me—except mother.”

Gods. Jon had never thought it possible that a highborn son could be so badly abused.

Yet, despite it all, Sam was still a rather cheerful person. He was also a very open person—extremely forthcoming with his opinions. No subterfuge at all. Once, Jon had wondered if maybe Sam was like Domeric—and all of this was some queer game or manipulation. Then he’d seen Sam turn green when, on their way to the gardens, they’d witnessed a goat being slaughtered for supper. Sam had begun to cry, telling them how much he hated blood. He’d remained despondent for hours.

The event had wiped any suspicious from Jon’s mind; not even Domeric was that good a liar.
Sam was just a genuinely honest person—Gods, so honest—especially about his emotions. The few times Jon had allowed himself to cry, it was almost always in response to a particularly brutal experience, and he’d always found an isolated spot to do it. Even on the birthday Robb had gotten him a cake Jon had sniffled silently, turned away from his brother’s gaze. Jon was mortified just by the idea of someone seeing him cry, and here was Sam, doing it over a goat.

_There must be a word for whatever Sam is, but I don’t think it’s craven._

Jon never thought he’d grow to admire someone like Sam. He was the opposite of what Jon knew a man _should_ be, and yet…Sam accepted himself. Jon envied him for it. When his father died and Sam became lord, his days would be full of reading and music and laughter just like he wanted. Hopefully, he’d marry a kind lady, and then Horn Hill would be a nicer place—even if people laughed at its lord. Sam would be happy, and Jon was relieved about that, at least.

The kind boy returned the sentiment, Jon learned, when he’d gotten Dany’s second letter six days into their stay.

Her first letter, which detailed Jaime Lannister’s punishment, had been waiting for them when they’d arrived at Horn Hill. Reading it, Jon once again marvelled at how clever she was: she’d found guards with no loyalty to any House, and a man to teach them for no coin. As for the youngest children, maybe she didn’t realize it, but telling them stories of Targaryen feats would no doubt enamor them to her House. Hadn’t Jon’s dreams of being a knight only emerged after hearing the tale of Aemon the Dragonknight, one of Dark Sister’s most famous owners, and the noblest knight to ever live? Those children would be loyal to her, Jon thought—and fiercely protective of their House. The tension in his chest that had existed since Harrenhal loosened slightly; he would be her first protector, but not her only one. Those dismissed by society grew devoted to the person that gave them a future.

Dany was _his_ future—which is why when Sam had cheerfully brought him the second letter, he’d been nearly sick with nerves. What would she say about Loras Tyrell? Was she ‘fawning’ over him? What would—_could_—Jon do then?

“Are you all right?” Sam asked, brows high in concern. Jon startled, realizing he’d hesitated from taking the letter the other boy held out.

“Yes,” he quickly responded, taking the missive. “Thanks, Sam.”

Sam seemed to hesitate, deliberating. “I’ll listen, you know. I—I’m good at that. My sisters always sneak into my room when they have a problem. Maybe I can help you too.”

Jon was a bit startled—Oberyn waited until Jon came to him, while Domeric had no interest in his emotions. Sam looked genuinely distressed on his behalf.

Jon opened his mouth to say he was sure—but hesitated. “I—you likely know that the king betrothed me to…”

“Daenerys Targaryen,” Sam said, nodding. “Everyone knows. Her name was spoken often here when the queen—” he paused noting Jon’s darkening face, and awkwardly stumbled, “That—that is, when everything…happened. Last year. My father was disgusted by the news—he said Cersei Lannister shamed herself.”

Well, that was one point in Randyll’s favor, at least—although Jon wasn’t entirely happy about it. Gods, sometimes Jon wished people could be just ‘good’ or ‘bad’—he didn’t want to consider that Randyll Tarly may have some honorable traits.
“We exchange letters,” Jon revealed, holding up the missive. He truly doubted Sam would use Jon’s relationship with Dany against him—and that fact was freeing.

“Oh,” Sam said, brows raised. Then he frowned in sympathy. “And they’re…unpleasant?”

Jon shook his head. “No, no, that’s not it. They’re just…just letters, I guess. I like getting them. Dany is—I mean, the princess Dae—the lady Daen—” he broke off, cursing. “Others take me, she has too many titles.”

Sam’s lips trembled, and he looked as if he’d laugh. Jon glared at him until he cleared his throat and looked appropriately serious again.

Jon took a breath, bluntly stating. “I like her.”

“Oh,” Sam blinked. “Well, that’s very good then, since you’re to wed. Does she not…like you in turn?”

Jon shook his head, “No, she does. Well, I think she does. She’s kind. To me and others. And clever. She knows how to get what she wants. And—and apparently her ‘beauty eclipses all others’, from what I’ve been told, and gods isn’t that a daunting thing to learn? As if she weren’t perfect already,” Jon said, glum.

“Hmm,” Sam said, scrunching his brows. “Targaryen’s are said to be a handsome lot—the songs aren’t shy about mentioning it. She does sound perfect.”

Jon squinted at that, frowning. “What was that tone?”

“What tone?” Sam looked nervous.

“You said ‘sound’ as if you don’t believe me,” Jon accused. “She’s not mad or cruel—she’s not her father!”

Sam retreated, cowed. “That—that’s not what I… Look, Jon, I’m not fast or strong or brave, but I like to think I’m observant. And, well, I don’t think anyone is perfect so—”

“Dany is,” Jon said, stubborn. “You don’t know her.”

“You don’t either,” Sam muttered under his breath, barely audible. Then he held up both hand to halt Jon’s rebuttal. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry. But, this isn’t what upset you, is it? When I gave you the letter.”

Jon let it go, grudgingly. “I recently made a deal with the Tyrells, a stupid, stupid deal, and maybe she’ll be angry or disappointed. And…” he felt his cheeks heat and ducked his face awkwardly. “I learned that Loras Tyrell is a squire in King’s Landing, and he’d popular with maidens and—well in my last letter I mentioned him and now…” he trailed off, the held up the letter, waving it around. “Gods, I sound like a fool.”

“Well,” Sam said plainly. “There’s not much good to do by worrying. You’ve just got to read it.”

Sam was right. Jon always thought too much—its what had gotten him in trouble before her first letter! Shaking his head to himself and broke the seal, determined to stop being such a coward. So what if Dany liked Loras? She and Jon were betrothed—by the will of the king. Their castle was nearly complete, waiting to be filled, and Dany was doing whatever she could for their House. A handsome lordling could do nothing to separate them.
With that in mind, he tilted his head down and read, right there in the hallway, Sam waiting patiently. It started with her praising him, and he felt relief and pride. Laughed when she mentioned Domeric. Smiled for her when she mentioned the Lady Myra was expecting—Dany loved Lord Stannis’s children. Felt regret at increasing Lord Stannis’s workload, and snickered at Ser Jaime’s predicament.

Then she started on the Tyrells, and Jon stiffened. She talked about Lady Margery a lot. Jon would have to tell her more about the other girl, given Dany’s obvious interest. Then he read about Loras, and his stomach dropped.

“She calls him handsome and talented!” Jon said, looking up at Sam. “She does like him!”

“Oh,” Sam said again, scratching his cheek. “But, is that what she said?”

Jon scowled. “I just said so.”

“No,” Sam corrected, patient. “You said she called him ‘handsome and talented.’ He’s a Tyrell—he’s likely both. Just like I’m fat and craven,” he joked, weakly, then cleared his throat to dispel the awkwardness his words elicited. “That is—it just seems like a simple description. Does she actually say she likes him?”

Jon looked back down, reading to the end, the met Sam’s eyes and shook his head. “She’s more interested in his sister,” Jon said, frowning in puzzlement.

Sam raised his brows, startled. “What? I…May I?” he held out his hand.

Jon paused—he’d only ever shared Dany’s letter once, with Oberyn, after her maid had been brutalized by that knight. But… “Don’t tell her,” Jon warned.

Sam nodded solemnly. Jon handed it over, after folding it in half to only include the parts about Margeary and Loras. He doubted Lady Olenna’s power was common knowledge—speaking of, how did Oberyn know about it? His friendship with lord Willas?—nor the Iron Bank business. He and Dany really should keep these letters vaguer.

Shaking the whirling thought away, Jon watched, anxious and already regretting it, as Sam read.

“Jon,” Sam’s tone was odd when he looked up, “Did you speak of Lady Margaery much in your last letter?”

Jon frowned—what could that have to do with anything? “Well, I guess—but I couldn’t just ask about Loras. I don’t want her to think me intrusive. So, I tried to ask her if he resembled the Lady Margaery. Why?”

Sam looked like he was fighting a smile. He cleared his throat. “I think, when you respond, you should make it clear that you have no interest in the lady Margaery.” He hesitated, “I mean, you don’t, right?”

Jon shook his head, still frowning. “No.”

Sam smiled, “Well, good! Just, tell lady Daenerys that. And don’t worry about lord Loras, I don’t think she’ll mention him again. Not with that salutation.”

What?

Jon took back the letter, perplexed. “What sal—?”
Love,

Dany.

Jon’s eyes widened and he choked on his inhale. The resulting *coughing fit* is why his face was scarlet, he would later insist to Sam. At the moment, Jon was too shocked to speak properly, let alone lie. He swore his heart stopped for a moment, and then restarted at twice the speed.

“Sam…this…this says…”

Sam grinned at him, his small eyes merry. “She likes you indeed, Jon.”

His face burned scarlet.

*****

Dear Dany,

_Thank you, Dany. Making that contract made me feel like a fool, but I’ve been told recently that I should think a bit less, or I’ll make myself ill with pointless worries. I have found that to be the case. You’re right—with Lord Arryn’s support, Highgarden won’t have as much power as they’d like._

_Horn Hill couldn’t be more different from Highgarden. Lord Randyll rules with an iron fist, and the atmosphere is dreary in the best of days. He responded to the moss rather coldly, as well, but said that if Highgarden supported it, he’d purchase it as well. That’s the best we can expect from him—he’s traditional indeed. If a man is not the embodiment of the Warrior, he dismisses him completely._

_It’s why he treats his eldest son, Samwell, deplorably; Sam doesn’t meet his requirements in the least. He’s a self-admitted coward, Dany, with no interest in war, hunting, or manly pursuits. He’s also probably the smartest boy I’ve ever met. He’s also honest in a way I’ve forgotten, considering the company I keep. There’s something so easy about my friendship with him, since there’s no subterfuge or hidden motives involved. I’ve grown fond of Samwell, Dany, so it’s difficult to witness how Lord Randyll either ignores him or speaks harshly. Our Houses will have a great relationship when he succeeds his father, of that I’m sure._

_I’ve read what you’ve had Ser Jaime do. It really couldn’t have been more perfect. The children will be loyal to you, Dany. They’ll protect you, thank the gods._

_As for Lady Olenna, she must be an exceptional woman. The Lady of Horn Hill, lady Melessa, has little power at all. Dinners are quiet, awkward affairs, and I doubt they’re any more pleasant when it’s only the family. Lord Randyll is obsessed with the prowess of his House and speaks of little but that. However Lady Olenna achieved her position, I commemorate her._

_You ask if I like the lady Margaery, but the truth is I hardly noticed her until she and Lady Olenna cornered me that final night. They were no doubt simply looking for information. Lady Margaery seems to be as pleasant as any other highborn girl, but I personally found myself uncomfortable around her, and not only for her devotion to the seven. Still, we will, of course, welcome her and her husband into our home._

_Lord Loras seems nice. I wish you good fortune in your efforts to bridge the gap between Lord Stannis and Lord Renly. Family is no easy beast._

_Please pass on my well wishes to Lady Myra._

¥
Love,
Jon.

Seventh Moon,
15th Day

My father is a brilliant man. Set in his ways, true, but he’s not as harsh as he seems,” Sam assured them on the twelfth day, as Oberyn, his squires, and Sam all rode into the southern woods. Prime hunting ground, Jon noted as they passed a litter of quickly fleeing rabbits. While there were forests in the Reach, no one would sacrifice the bounty they provided for wood unless times were desperate. It’s why the Houses imported their winter wood, and why the moss was so valuable.

Jon and Domerick were getting low on arrows, so they’d planned the trip yesterday. Making them yourself built discipline, according to Oberyn—although Jon suspected he’d come along only because he was painfully bored in stiff Horn Hill. Domerick also wanted to get some fresh herbs for his soap-making hobby. Sam didn’t enjoy riding, he’d admitted, but he did long for company.

“Since my brother was born,” Sam continued. “He’s come to realize that I simply cannot be the son he wanted. Now, he has Dickon to spend all his efforts on—to my relief! Before my brother’s birth, father hired countless masters-at-arms to try and turn me into what Dickon is naturally.”

Yes, Sam had told Jon bits and pieces about his past, and it sounded horrifying. One master-at-arms forced Sam to sleep in chainmail, and the young boy would always awaken in pain. Another had dressed him in his mother’s clothing and forced him to walk around the keep, convinced the shame would ‘cure’ Sam’s disposition. His father had once even hired some men from Qarth who’d claimed to be warlocks. They’d forced Sam to bathe in the blood of a slaughtered auroch. All he’d gotten from that ludicrous ritual was a fever. Still, lord Randyll didn’t give up, turning his effort to squiring Sam with Lord Paxter Redwyne, and hopefully betrothing him to the man’s daughter. Lord Paxter had rejected both proposals, and Sam and his father had returned home in shame.

“I know I’m a disappointment to him, and I do wish things were different, but I cannot change my nature.” Sam looked sad about that, but nevertheless resigned. “At least now I am free to enjoy my own pursuits.” Domerick glanced at him but didn’t speak. “Lord Willas is lame, yet his family has accepted him, and the world acknowledges his skills. Why, father has even purchased a hound trained by lord Willas—the best hunter you’ll ever see. I know one day I’ll be useful in my own way.”

Jon smiled at Sam’s optimism.

Later, they were sitting in a sunny glade. Oberyn was napping in the sun, Jon was fashioning arrows, and Sam was chatting about the history of maesters in Westeros. Domerick returned with a handful of weeds. He spread them all out in front of him and reached into his bag to get the book he pressed them in.

“Oh, you don’t want to use that one, my lord—it’s poisonous,” Sam exclaimed, pointing at a small
blue-flowered weed. “You’ll get a terrible rash if you use it in soap.”

Domeric examined the plant in question. “I’ve read of this plant in your very own library, my lord. There was no such mention.”

Sam smiled, “It’s a mimic—see the leaves on this one? Four points. The plant you want has five. And you see the petals, how they end in a tip? The other plant has round petals. They’re similar, I know, but I would not lead you false. When my sister Talla was ill with a fever, I helped our maester forage for plants to soothe her sleep and I learned a lot about these woods.”

Domeric held the plant up carefully with his gloved fingers, and Jon saw the things Sam had described.

“He is correct,” Oberyn said, yawning as he reclined in the sun. He briefly opened one eye. “Use that one enough, and it will cause painful, blistering hives. You have a good eye, boy.”

Sam smiled, shy, “Thank you, prince Oberyn. You briefly studied at the Citadel, I recall. Did you forge a link for medicine?”

“I fashioned many links,” Oberyn murmured noncommittally, closing his eyes again. “But alas, celibacy is no life for Oberyn Martell.” Jon wondered which links had given Oberyn such a keen eye for poisonous plants.

“Still, it must have been wonderful—all those books,” Sam sighed wistfully.

Oberyn stretched, chucking. “Books. There certainly were many of those, at least. Yet, fewer intelligent men than you would believe. You, though—I could see a chain on you in six years. Eight, perhaps”

Sam brightened at the praise—yet his eyes were sad. “I thank you, Ser, but I’m the heir to Horn Hill. My future is set.”

Oberyn opened one eye again, scanning Sam slowly. “Is it?”

Jon felt a chill—a premonition of something terrible. Sam’s smile faltered.

Domeric cast the weed aside, drawing their attention. “You have my thanks, Samwell Tarly.”

*****

Domeric Bolton’s gratitude was an odd creature, Jon learned three nights later. “I saw young lord Dickon in the yard today, my lord,” Domeric recounted while they all sat at dinner. “For being so young, he showed admirable skill.”

“Yes,” Randyll said, cutting his chicken and not looking up. “Dickon does his name proud.”

The youngest son grinned—the eldest slumped. Jon eyed Domeric suspiciously. Oberyn, bored, only took a sip of his wine, while the ladies kept eating with no reaction.

“Indeed, my lord. As a hero of the Rebellion, martial prowess is surely a quality you appreciate, as would any lord of true standing. House Tarly’s words are "First in Battle," if I’m not mistaken, my lord?”

“That’s correct,” Randyll said, glancing up with growing impatience. “I thought you Northerners were quick to the point. There is a point, I’m assuming.”
Domeric lowered his head bashfully. “Forgive me, my lord, I am only a boy enamored with a champion of the Rebellion. I’ve read the history of House Tarly—your military might is renown from the Neck to the Wall. My Lord Father saw you in battle, wielding your ancestral sword, and said you embodied the might of the Tarly name.” He motioned to the Valyrian Sword, Heartsbane, which was displayed behind Randyll’s chair at the head of the table. It had been in the Tarly family for more than five hundred years. Randyll only nodded—but Jon thought he was pleased.

“I’ve long heard stories of Heartsbane, and how it’s passed from father to heir,” Domeric continued, excited and boyish and totally alien. “Why, the story of lord Samwell Tarly—” Everyone stiffened, and Randyll gripped goblet tighter. “—featured the legendary sword. They say he hunted down that Dornish criminal, the Vulture King, and defeated him in single combat. When one hears the name Tarly, they hear strength—valor.” Domeric took a bite of his potato. “A proud House with a fierce history—lord Dickon embodies it, my lord.”

A brief, satisfied smile appeared on Lord Randyll’s face. Jon’s tension only increased as he stared at his fellow squire, waiting for—something. Dom took another bite, as if completely unaware, smiling vapidly at the party. Then he said, “If I may ask, my Lord, at what age will lord Samwell be granted Heartsbane?”

A pulse of pure silence. Then lady Melessa sucked in a sharp breath.

Randyll face turned horribly red, his previous pleasure disappearing into gashing teeth, and the vein in his forehead pulsed. He slammed his goblet down so hard the dishes rattled and wine sloshed over onto the table. Everyone flinched. Domeric dropped his fork as if in shock.

“Never will I hand Heartsbane to that craven—!”

He caught himself—too late.

Sam pushed himself up in one jerky move, rattling the dishes, and nearly ran from the hall. Before he disappeared, Jon saw him wipe his forearm across his face. Jon thought Lady Melessa, too, was near tears when she rose and quickly excused herself, hastening after her son.

Domeric raised his hand to his mouth, the picture of shocked regret. “I meant no offense, my lord! Gods, forgive my northern crassness—we’re but a thoughtless people!”

Randyll was gripping his knife so hard his fingers were bone-white. “I apologize for my wife and—son. Dinner is over.”

He rose with a loud screech of his chair and strode after the pair, hands shaking with rage. The girls quickly got to their feet and curtseyed. Jon saw lady Talla glare hatefully at Domeric before they left. The massive room was empty but for the three.

Jon surged to his feet, rage bursting forth. He turned and shoved Domeric with all his might. The older boy grunted as his head collided with the wooden back of his chair.

“Why!” Jon demanded, the shout echoing in the large chamber. “Why! You say you don’t feel—so why be so cruel? You gain nothing!”

Oberyn leaned back in his seat, watching with interest, and used his knife to sewer a piece of chicken and bring it to his mouth. Jon shot him a scowl as well.

“One free shot, Jon Snow,” Domeric warned, gingerly touching his head. “I needed to confirm something.”
“What—how easy it is to play with people?” Jon ground out through tingly clenched teeth. “Sam didn’t deserve that!”

“I needed,” Dom continued evenly, lowering his hand from his injured head, “to confirm Lord Randyll’s priorities. The heir gets the sword.”

Jon’s anger—faltered. “I—what?”

“Still so naive, Jon Snow,” Domeric murmured. “You have an interesting view of the highborn—you see their cruelty to the lowborn, to the bastards, and even to each other. Why is it so shocking that it happens within a family, as well? Tell me, did you truly think—considering all we’ve witnessed—that Samwell Tarly will actually inherit Horn Hill?”

Oberyn skewed another piece. Chewed leisurely.

“Of—of course,” Jon protested, thrown. “Of course he will—Sam’s the heir.”

“Ah, it is almost a pity to shatter your illusions, boy.” Oberyn sighed. “I had thought, perhaps, to let you have this one for some years yet. You’ve grown fond of that awkward child. Unfortunately, this one,” he pointed at Domeric with the knife, “feels no such pity.”

“Sam’s the heir,” Jon repeated, faltering into uncertainty. “He’s trueborn—he has a mother and father—”

“A mother with no power. A father who despises him. Lord Randyll is a traditional man; he will never allow his craven son to inherit. The sword”—Oberyn motioned to Heartsbane, “—proves it.”

Jon shook his head. His throat was tight.

“Your denial is understandable,” Oberyn said, pity in the tone, “You’ve grown fond of him, and cannot be objective.”

“Lord Tarly placed every effort into shaping his firstborn into the lord he wanted,” Domeric summarized, standing. Objectivity was no issue for him. He dusted breadcrumbs off his pants and meticulously straightened his tunic. “Years upon years of effort—a dozen masters, radical techniques. He—a devout follower of the Seven—even resorted to Essosi warlocks. A man like that does not simply accept a son like Samwell. It is no coincidence that he now focuses his efforts on the younger son and ignores the elder. His rage at my question is further proof. Samwell Tarly will be taken out of the line of succession,” Domeric concluded, cool. “One way or another. It’s likely that only the lady Melessa’s influence, weak as it is, has spared him thus far.”

Oberyn didn’t protest. He placed his left elbow on his chair’s arm and rested his chin on his fist. “Such is the reality of Westeros.”

Jon felt ill. Oberyn was right: he hadn’t wanted to know this. He’d like his mental image of merry Lord Sam. He’d ignored all indications that it was fake. Even though it all looked so obvious now.

“Sam will be thrown away,” Jon muttered—bitterness at the world burning his throat. “My father would never do this,” Jon spat.

Oberyn straitened, lips thinning. “Take care not to confuse reality with idealism, Jon Snow. Eddard Stark has no son like Samwell Tarly—you know nothing of what he would do.” Jon made to protest, but Oberyn shot him a quelling look. “I am not questioning his goodness or his treatment of children, but this is a matter of succession. The North is a harsh place—it’s people more so. The lords would not easily trust a craven.”
Jon flinched. He wanted to deny it. Sam was his friend, and Jon wanted to deny it but…

He couldn’t.

He looked away, ashamed. Sam had his own type of bravery, but he wasn’t someone Jon would want at his back in a battle. He wasn’t someone to inspire men in times of war…and maybe not even in times of peace. All this life, Jon had scorned and hated society for how it rejected him. Now he realized he’d always been a part of that society.

Still, Jon felt the need to assert. “My father wouldn’t have treated Sam like lord Randyll does—never. He’d have found another way.”

Oberyn learned back, nodding. “This I grant you. And under his direction, perhaps Samwell would have never reached this sorry state.”

“All men are born with a set nature,” was Domeric’s only argument.

“Maybe,” Jon challenged, stubborn. “But even you act like this because of what your father expects. You’d be different if he were.”

Domeric stared at him for a silent moment. Then he looked away without argument—he either had none or didn’t want to waste energy on it.

“Where would Sam go?” Jon muttered, directing his attention away from this pointless debate about nature. The question was mostly self-directed.

“There are many ways to get rid of unwanted boys with unwanted claims,” Domeric answered, pragmatic as always.

The Citadel, was Jon’s first thought. He thought of gentle Sam and his love of books. He could picture Maester Samwell enthusiastically educating his young charges. They’d love him, Jon would bet—he’d make lessons fun. He could picture Sam advising the Lord and Lady he served. He could picture Sam…sitting beside Jon and Dany as they decided the fate of their lands.

“My father raged for days when I told him I should like to be a maester. I was seven,” Sam said, desolate. “He would never condone a Tarly wearing the chain, he said. To show me my foolishness, father had me manacled to the wall for three days. He is strict, but he means well, Jon,” he said, painfully certain. “I was young, and I understand now—of course his heir cannot wear the chain!”

He’d been shocked at the story—shocked more so by Sam’s defense of his father. But now it gained a new level of tragedy, because Sam wasn’t the heir. He hadn’t been since the moment Dickon was born. Gods, how had Jon been so blind to all the clues? Lord Randyll no longer invested any effort into Sam because there was no point.

The lord’s attitude towards maesterhood was still strong, so Sam wouldn’t be sent to the Citadel…

“He’ll be sent to the Wall,” Jon realized—and pictured soft Sam amongst the criminals and hardened men of the Night’s Watch. Sam, with his soft clothes and love of colour, dressed in black. Jon imagined Sam being trained by cruel Ser Alliser Thorne, ridiculed all the while. No one would be kind to him there—especially not when they learned he was the son of a lord. Then Jon imagined Sam being sent beyond the Wall to face the wildlings. “But that’s a death sentence for him.”

“Lord Tarly longs for that day,” Oberyn asserted, leaning further into his fist. “He’ll not lose a moment of sleep.”
It began slowly—almost without his awareness. Soon, Jon was shaking his head rapidly back and forth. “No—no. It’s not too late for Sam—he can learn.”

Oberyn leaned back, tapping the fingers of his free hand against his leg. “Will you teach him, then? You think you can succeed where others have failed? You think you can change a man’s nature?”

“His masters-at-arms’ didn’t care about him—I do. He’s my friend,” Jon asserted. It may have started as pity, but he’d grown to care. “I know what’s at stake. Just—give me until the end of the month. I know you planned to leave soon—but give me until—”

Oberyn waved his hand. “Again, I must remind all that Oberyn Martell has no plans. Take your month, boy. A lesson shall be taught, that is certain, and I think it entertaining to see which one.

“You,” he pointed to Domeric, “Will make amends with Lord Tarly. Warrior knows Horn Hill is tedious enough without his moods. No more games—play the Northern fool for the next month.”


Oberyn finally stood and made his way to the door. He ruffled Domeric’s hair as he passed, smirking when the older boy flinched away. “Thank the gods for daughters,” he murmured, walking out with a leisurely lope.

Jon and Dom stared at each other.

“There were other ways,” Jon shook his head, still angry.

Domeric smiled. “None so simple. Samwell has a dedicated teacher now, my debt to him is repaid. Furthermore, you’ll be grateful to me, when this—” he waved his hand dismissively “—anger ceases.” He made to turn but paused. “And that boy won’t speak to me anymore. His conversation was taxing.”

With that, the elder boy made his exit, perfectly satisfied. Jon stared after him for a long time. Domeric’s methods made his head spin—but he couldn’t dispute his results.

*****

Dear Jon,

You’re no fool, Jon Snow, unless you say so to me! Tell me which other boy your age has made a successful deal with a Great House? None! I tell everyone who listens that my betrothed successfully negotiated with the Tyrells, and they are appropriately impressed. Anyone who sneers is simply not worth my time.

Speaking of the moss, my cousin and I met with Lord Arryn. The hand of the King didn’t seem comfortable with my presence—I’m not sure he has the best opinion of ladies—but I said that this is on behalf of my future House, and I deserved to participate. Our meeting went a lot easier than yours, I bet. Lord Arryn quickly agreed to make further enquiry. As you know, the Vale is probably the most dependent on importing wood during the winter, and the dangerous mountain paths make transporting it difficult. Our moss will allow them to transport considerably more fuel per trip. It was much easier since Lord Arryn is close with Lord Stark, and trusts his word without question. He planned to write to Lord Benjen to arrange a trial shipment so he may test it, but he has no qualms about endorsing the product, nor did he try to demand a similar monopoly over it. My cousin tells me that Lord Arryn owes much to Lord Stark for helping with the matter of the previous queen, and sees this as a good way to repay him. Your father is a great man, Jon, to be so trusted by the realm. I envy you for that.
I hope they are loyal, the children. I want them to follow me North. In the time I’ve been here, one of
the eldest girls and three of the eldest boys left the orphanage. Jaime is candid when I ask about
their choices. The girls will be lucky to find some man to marry them or an apprentice. The boys will
look to be hired as guards, or apprentice in some heavy trade. But it’s hard for them, since even the
smallfolk have their politics and hierarchies. I worry for them, Jon, but I can’t force them. It was a
hard lesson to learn, but everyone deserves to make their own choices.

I feel sorry for lord Samwell. I’ve met men like Lord Randyll, and they don’t change once their path
is set. Myra tells me cousin Stannis was once on that path before they married. I think he’s always
been kind, my cousin, but before he was forced to bury it. Lord Randyll seems to be forcing Samwell
to be other than his nature, and Myra says that never ends well. I wish him well.

Oh, so you have no special regard for Lady Margaery? Jon, you’ll think me foolish, but I was
envious of her! It was terrible, since she truly sounds like a nice person, but I couldn’t help it. Don’t
mock me for it, Jon Snow, or I’ll...think of something appropriately punishing for you! I’m good at
that. Also, I suppose Lord Loras is nice, but he talks far too much and praises even more-so. He
doesn’t have all that much to say, funny enough, he just likes to talk (don’t think me mean, you’d feel
the same!). I must bear it since he’s always with Lord Renly.

I’ve told Myra of your well wishes. She sends her thanks and wishes you well in your travels.

You didn’t mention another destination, so I’ll send this back to Horn Hill. How long will you be
staying?

Love,

Dany.

Seventh Moon, 23rd Day

*****

“Jon, I’m terrible at it! A dozen masters-at-arms failed—I just…I just don’t like fighting.”

“Come on, Sam, I’ll be your teacher this time. It might even be fun! You’ll be able to do it if you just
try a bit, I know it.”

Sam frowned, looking completely pathetic. “I don’t understand, Jon. Is this about the—the dinner. It
was a shock to hear it, but I know lord Domeric didn’t mean to be cruel. And I’m over it now—I
know I’m not a warrior and that Heartsbane will go to Dickon. That’s okay, he’s my brother, and it
suits him more than me.”

Jon shook his head, frustrated. He opened his mouth—he’d tell Sam the truth. Then the other boy
would be motivated to learn. But Jon...hesitated. Would Sam ever be able to deal with the news that
he was being abandoned? For all lord Randyll had done, Sam still loved his father. He wouldn’t tell
him, Jon decided. He’d teach Sam, who’d then impress lord Randyll, and father and son could fix
their relationship. Sam wouldn’t have to be faced with his father’s betrayal.

“You told me you wanted to make your father proud, Sam,” Jon argued—all boys wanted that.
“Well, this is the only way you can. Come on, just until I leave!”

Sam stared at him for a moment, suddenly seeming smaller. His smile was weak at best and didn’t
reach his eyes. “Okay, Jon.”

“Come on, Sam!” Jon exclaimed two weeks after that conversation, glaring at the sweat-drenched
boy before him. Sam was panting and almost fully bent over from exhaustion. It was nearly noon meal, and they’d been at the yard since breakfast. “How many times have I told you to *lift your shield!* Others take you, it’s there for a reason!”

Sam hunched down further, lip trembling, and looked at Jon as if he were a wounded dog. Rather than provoking pity, it only frustrated Jon further. He ignored Sam’s beseeching look and surged forward, swinging the practice sword much slower than he *could,* and aiming directly for Sam’s shield. Instead of raising his arm to defend himself, Sam clenched his eyes shut tightly and tried to back away. He tripped over his own feet and went down into the hard earth of the training yard.

Sam cried out in pain as he landed, twisting onto his side and grasping at his right elbow. Jon saw that he’d badly scraped it when he’d fallen, and blood was quickly spreading over his green training tunic. Jon hesitated, about to kneel down to help—and then remembered that they were to leave at soon as Dany’s letter arrive—likely within *three days.* Yet Sam hadn’t improved at all no matter how much Jon tried! His frustration only built as the time pressure increased.

How could anyone be this bad at movement? Sam was completely uncoordinated and unmotivated, besides. That first day, they’d started slowly with basic stances, but Sam was clumsy and couldn’t keep the needed rhythm.

So, Jon had tried teaching him bits of water dancing, to help his balance, but Sam just didn’t have the grace required. The movements always ended up confusing him, and more often than not he’d fall. After a week of failing all that, Jon had thought perhaps the sword was just not Sam’s weapon.

He’d tried the bow, since it didn’t require much motion, only to find that Sam arms were too weak to successfully pull the string. So, Jon had then tried melee weapons, one after another, but Sam seemed to be even worse at them. Jousting, too, was useless—although that ‘sport’ wouldn’t impress lord Randyll. The spear was a Dornish weapon, and the Tarlys held their prejudices close.

To make all Jon’s troubles worse, Samwell *hated* pain. He was constantly fretting about hurting himself and would unconsciously keep the weapon at a distance. Jon’s frustration only grew with every failure.

So now here they were, almost out of time, and back to the sword. Jon decided to just spar with Sam, teach him by *doing* rather than *showing.* Perhaps if Sam got use to real battle, he’d at least learn to mimic it.

Yet, Sam seemed to be supernaturally averse to fighting. When they spared, he flinched and closed his eyes. When Jon grew frustrated and ended up yelling, Sam would get teary and despondent. When Jon ordered Sam to strike at him, Sam was so worried about actually doing injury that his blows were slow and weak. Even when Jon tried to make him angry—to channel that anger into his sword—it only ended up making Sam *sad.*

Needless to say, Jon wasn’t in the kindest frame of mind at the moment. Not only did Sam’s *future* hang in the balance, but Jon Snow had honestly never failed so badly at something in his *life.* Fighting came easily to him, like his body hungered for it. But he was obviously an appalling teacher.

His wounded pride and increasing fear for Sam’s future were twisting into a truly ugly combination.

“Jon, it hurts,” Sam blubbered. “Look, look, I’m bleeding. Oh gods, I’m bleeding! I’ve got to go to the Maester.”

Had this been another day, Jon would have agreed. As it was, he shook his head. “No. It’s just a
scratch—we don’t have time for the maester. Get up, Sam” Jon ordered. Sam stared up at him, wide-eyed and wounded. The resulting guilt only made Jon angry, “Get up!”


At this rate, he’d end up at the Wall no matter what. Jon hadn’t been able to tell Sam the truth of why they were doing this. He couldn’t bear to see Sam’s faith in his father die. He remembered how sick he’d felted when he’d thought his father had been complicit in the rape and murder of princess Elia and her children. No one deserved that agony.

But his efforts seemed to be pointless. Jon was leaving soon, but even hours upon hours of effort saw no change. Sam was completely terrible at this, and Jon’s temper had been steadily building for days. All he could think of was that Sam was wasting his life. He was highborn. He was the heir. He could have everything Jon had ever wanted; and yet he was wasting it by not trying. Jon was doing everything he could to help him, but Sam couldn’t even bother to remember to keep his shield up!

“It’s only a bit of pain,” Jon ground out, frustrated. “I’ve had a lot worse. Come on Sam, just get up.”

Sam’s lips twisted into a pout, and, in a horribly pathetic voice, beseeched “Jon please. I don’t want to do this anymore. It’s not working and it hurts. And…and I’m really hungry.”

And Jon lost his hold on his temper.

Weeks of frustration boiled over and found only one target. “Hungry? Hungry! How could you be hungry, Sam, when you’re storing half the castles food!”

Samwell flinched as if he’d been struck. His free hand came up to cover his large stomach in shame. “Jon…”

But Jon wasn’t done.

“Do you understand what you have, Sam!? A family—a House all your own! Do you know how long I’ve dreamed of what you have? And you don’t even care! You’re throwing it all away—and for what? Stupid, senseless things like dancing!”

Sam’s face lost all color.

Jon heard himself, as if from a distance, but couldn’t stop. Years of vitriol spewed from his lips. He didn’t care—it was all too much. The weight of everything was just too much. “Get up, Sam, or I swear by all the gods!”

Sam didn’t rise—he crumbled further. He lay down in the dirt, curled into a ball, and sobbed as if his heart were breaking. Sam cried in great heaving breath, snot and tears mingling on his flushed, sweaty face. The earth under him was smearing with blood. Sam shook his head, releasing great hiccupping sobs. “I-I can’t. No more. Please, Jon, please. No more. Please. I-I just can’t.”

He cried as if part of him were dying—and Jon had wielded the weapon.

Jon’s rage disappeared instantly, and his sword fell from suddenly numb fingers. The events of the last few minutes assaulted him, leaving him chilled. By the gods, what am I doing?

“Please, Jon,” Sam continued to sob, rocking himself. “D-Don’t hate m-me. Please.”

Jon shook his head, taking a step forward. “Sam…Sam, I’m sorr—”
“Pathetic,” Lord Randyll spat, standing beside his wife at the courtyard’s entrance as he stared down at the crying form of his eldest son. His scowl twisting his face into something truly ugly. "Have you no shame, sobbing like an infant before the entire House?” Randyll turned and continued on his way.

Jon imagined running him through with Dark Sister.

Lady Melessa rushed forward and knelt down beside her son. Sam curled his head into her skirts, crying. “M-m-mother…I’m s-s-sorry. I’m sorry… I don’t wa-want t-to be a-a crav-ven. I’m s-so s-s-sorry.”

Jon could only stand there, feeling like a monster.

Lady Melessa gently pet his hair. “Shhh, my love, shhh now. Oh, look at how you’ve hurt yourself! Oh my poor love, come on, stand up now, we’ll go to the Maester. Come on Sam, for me, please?”

Still sobbing, Sam slowly got to his feet, burying his face in his mother’s side. She soothed him.

“She shot him a scornful glare, lips twisted. “You have done enough. Had I the power, I’d order you flogged.” She sook her head. “I should have listened when the septon warned me of the evils of bastards.”

Jon recoiled. He stood there, suddenly aware of how the windows and doorways were filled with servants and guards watching the event, and felt as if his body were hollow. Lady Melessa called for a guard, who appeared immediately to help her. Jon was left there alone, feeling for the first time as if everything the Seven said about him was true.

*****

Sam didn’t leave his room for the next two days. Jon was too ashamed to go to him—he was too ashamed to even go to the dining hall and see the Lady Melessa’s accusatory face. Jon was too afraid of being confronted with what he’d turned into.

He’d even refused to allow Oberyn or Doméric near him, lest they condemn his actions. Or—worse—excuse them.

Who’s the craven now, Jon Snow?

How had his desire to help Sam turned into something so ugly? How had he let his own bitterness hurt his friend? Jon felt like the worst person in Westeros. Surely only a monster could have hurt someone like Samwell.

A knock on his door brought Dany’s letter, in the hands of Oberyn Martell.

“You refuse me entry, boy, and I shall simply keep this. I wonder what the little dragon has to say? Perhaps I shall share it with Doméric, as well. I know Lord Bolton will certainly find something of interest.”

Jon begrudgingly opened the door, staring irritably up at Oberyn’s smug face. He tried to snatch the letter away, but the man held it up high, away from Jon’s reach.

“I don’t need your lecture, prince,” Jon muttered, eyeing the letter mulishly and wishing he were taller already. “I know I made a fool of myself—and hurt Sam. You were right—I was arrogant.”
Oberyn shouldered past, kicking the door closed behind him. “A shame, I was even hopeful. Well, a lesson is a lesson.” He took a seat at the lone chair, tapping the letter on his knee.

Jon made his way to the bed, watching Oberyn mulishly. He wouldn’t give Jon the letter until he’d had his say, apparently. He slumped wearily. “I—I became someone horrible. I didn’t know I could be like that.”

“Do not fret so, boy,” Oberyn said, almost gently. “We are but human. And this mistake taught you something important, yes?”

“Yes,” Jon admitted, depressed. “I should have told him the truth—of course he wasn’t properly motivated if he didn’t know what it was all for. And I was a fool to think I could teach him anything of use in just two weeks. An arrogant fool. I let the pressure and bitterness control me and took it out on Sam.”

The room descended to silence. After a few moments, Oberyn’s tapping paused. Jon kept his despondent gaze on the floor.

“Is that…?” Oberyn trained off. Jon glanced up to see him raising his brows. Oberyn began to tap his fingers against his knee, leaning forward contemplatively. Jon was immediately wary. “Tell me,” the man began. “Do you still think you could make that boy into a proper heir—if only you had more time?”

Jon frowned, thinking. “Well, Sam would know the truth this time…and I rushed through it all, prince. Even Syrio, a master, needed months with me. I’ve been properly humbled, alright?” he muttered.

Oberyn let out a sigh, and Jon frowned at the disappointment in the sound.

“What?” he muttered, defensive. “I know I’m only eleven, but you said yourself I’m talented. I just…have to teach myself how to teach.”

“Well,” Oberyn said, dry. “You’ve learned a lesson.”

He left the letter on the nightstand and made his way to Jon, who was frowning in confusion. Oberyn knelt before him, and the two held each other’s gaze for many moments. Then Oberyn laughed quietly through his nose and reached up to ruffle Jon’s hair.

Jon batted the hand away, sullen. “What do you mean, a lesson?”

Oberyn didn’t answer, he only flicked Jon’s forehead. “Ow!” he complained, glaring.

Oberyn just chuckled. “Make amends to Samwell, boy, lest it haunts you.”

Jon felt his throat close with anxiety just thinking about approaching Sam again. Did the other boy hate him now? Sam had been so nice—and Jon had thrown it all back in his face. Others take me.

Oberyn made his way to the door.

“Are we leaving tomorrow?” Jon called out.

The older man just waved his hand casually, not looking back. “Come find me after lunch.”

Jon sighed in irritation at the man’s flighty ways.

He got to his feet and retrieved Dany’s letter. He still felt horrible—she would surely cheer him up.
Then, he swore, he would go to Sam and explain himself, no matter how much the other now hated him.

He wasn’t looking forward to telling Dany about all this.

*****

Knocking on Sam’s door took more courage than Jon wanted to admit. He paced before the chamber for at least ten minutes, oscillating between knocking and leaving at least half a dozen times. It was the memory of Highgarden that finally pushed him to.

Hadn’t he told Lady Olenna that his father was a great man for taking responsibility for his actions? Jon had never realized just how hard it was to shame oneself and then have to face the consequences. Ned Stark was a great man indeed.

Jon knocked.

There was no answer.

He waited for a few moments. Knocked again, heart in his throat.

Nothing.

Jon cleared his throat a couple of times, preparing himself, they called out, “Sam?” his voice cracked. He cleared his throat again. “Sam, it’s Jon are you…Are you there?”

Still, no response. But Jon heard something inside the room creak. He knew Sam was in there—he hadn’t left since the incident between them.

Jon took a breath. “Sam, just…listen. I didn’t—I shouldn’t have…I’m sorry, Sam. Just, I’m so sorry. I’m leaving tomorrow, and I can’t leave it like this between us. You’re…you’re my friend, Sam. Maybe the first one I’ve really had…since I left Winterfell. I should never have treated you like that…I shouldn’t—”

The door creaked open.

Only a small sliver of Sam’s face was visible. His eye was red. “You don’t…hate me?”

Jon’s heart squeezed so tightly he would swear it ruptured. Swallowing was difficult.

“No,” he rasped. “No, Sam.”

I hate myself. Never again, Sam. To you or anyone. I swear it.

The door opened further. Sam looked ragged and his hair was an oily mess. “I…thought about it, Jon. About everything. I—I told you I like to think I’m observant. And…” Sam met his eyes, and there was a haunted quality to them. “It started after that…dinner. I didn’t understand—Lord Domeric does not seem the fool, Jon, so I didn’t understand his motive. He…he's not been mean to me, like others sometimes are, so I couldn't understand why.”

Sam looked terrified—the gaze of a man who was on the precipice of a truth he’d rather avoid. Jon didn’t want to tell him. He didn’t want Sam’s happy life to end. But if Sam knew, maybe he could avoid it. Sam was smart.

“And then,” Sam continued, opening the door wider. His clothes were rumpled, as were the sheets Jon saw on the bed behind him. The covers were thrown haphazardly on the floor. “And then you
came to me and said you wanted to teach me. You said it was the ‘only way’. You see, for a moment I thought—thought maybe you didn’t like me—"

“I do, Sam!” Jon said, fierce. That was true. He liked who Sam was—he didn’t want him to change. But what other option was there? If Sam couldn’t gain his father’s acceptance, he’d be sent away to die.

A small, weak smile in response. The relief on Sam’s face was palpable.

“I know—you’re nice, Jon. So nice. That why I was going to say, “but I pushed that thought aside.” And then I began to think that…maybe so nice that sometimes it boils over. That you were trying to be nice to me these last weeks, even with all the harsh lessons, to spare me from something worse. But then you realized it was impossible and got angry.”

Jon flinched at the memory.

“Tell me the truth, Jon.” Sam voice wavered, and his eyes looked wet from old and new tears. He pushed the door open and stepped aside. “Tell me why you did it.”

Jon wanted to leave.

Instead, he took a breath and walked inside.

Dany was right. Everyone deserved to make their own choices.

*****

He’s gone, Dany!

Prince Oberyn left us here! Domeric and I went to fetch him, only to find his room empty and his horse and pack gone! That-that-that gods damned Dornishman! We found a missive, Dany, and a bag of gold—he truly has left us! The note said he’d grown bored of squires and was thinking of visiting The Summer Isles! He “misses the rum,” Dany! Gods, that irresponsible, flighty, frustrating…! “I’ll be back by the new year,” he say! That’s in five months! He’s leaving us at Horn Hill for five months!

Gods, I know this is my fault. I know this has to do with Samwell and I. I should have seen the cues, Dany. Others take him, this is worse than Braavos. You spoke too soon in your letter, I’m afraid. I’ve shown myself to be a real fool, these past weeks. You say people deserve a choice, and I took that away from Sam. You see, we learned that his father is likely planning to send him to the Wall when he reaches maturity, since Sam has none of the qualities Lord Randyll values in an heir.

It’s sickening, Dany. I arrogantly tried to fix it—I tried to fit ten years of lessons into two weeks. I failed, as any fool should have known I would, and worst of all I acted truly vile towards Sam. I never want to be that person again, Dany. Never.

Apologizing and telling Sam my reasons was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Sam was too damned kind, Dany. He was worried that I was mad at him—that I hated him. When by all rights he should be cursing me and raging and making me work for his forgiveness. Instead, he was only relieved that I didn’t hate him. I don’t know if this is Lord Tarly’s impact, but it’s terrible. Of all the men in the world, Sam deserves only good things.

And yet I had to tell him he was going to be abandoned. It was as if something died with him, Dany. Some weak flicker of hope. He didn’t even deny it—not really. I think he’d always suspected the truth, and my confirmation was only a final nail in the coffin.
He didn’t even cry. That was even more painful to witness. He only nodded, Dany. He only nodded.

I swore to him that I’d help him somehow. I think that’s why Prince Oberyn left. I think he was trying to give me time. Sam doesn’t deserve the Wall. Now that he knows for sure what’s at stake, and now that I’ve learned my own lesson, we’ll take this slow. He’ll impress his father—I know it. Lord Randyll will change his mind about Sam. He must love him, surely. Sam is his son.

At least that’s a good thing of having to stay in this household for another five months. The Lady Melessa despises me now—with good reason. No mother would accept how I treated her son. I see it as a fair punishment.

The other good side of all this is that Domeric is forced play the part of Northern fool for five months. Domeric is as irate as Domeric can get. Well, it’s a fitting punishment for him, for what he did to Sam. I’ll tell you the story one day.

Forgive me, I’ve been focusing too much on myself. Lord Arryn should have known better than to try to bar you from the meeting. I knew it was likely he’d agree, but the confirmation is always pleasant to hear. Thank you, Dany. For what you did and what you said about my father.

They’ll be loyal. But yes, we can’t make choices for others. I, too, learned that the hard way.

I’ve passed on your wishes to Sam. He blushed pink to hear it—I think you’d like him, Dany. I’ve never met a boy so smart.

I would not dare mock you, my lady. Mockery is the last reaction I had to your admission—I smiled like a fool, instead.

Love,

Jon.

PS: I wish you luck in tolerating lord Loras.

Eighth Moon, 1st Day

Dear Jon,

I can’t say I understand your situation. You cannot understand mine, either, I know. But I know how arrogance can swallow you. terrible—I think we can all be a bit terrible, sometimes. I never told you how I got Jaime to teach the children, Jon. I went to Ser Barristan Selmy and I used every choice he’s made since the Rebellion to hurt him. I knew it would work, because he’s always tried to be kind to me. He tries to be kind, and yet he bent the knee. I’ve never been angry enough to consider confronting him about it, yet I did for selfish purposes.

Sometimes I’m so angry at everything—at the unfairness of it all. At what my father became. At what my mother endured. At what Rhaegar caused. At the king and former queen for how they humiliated me. At the world for ignoring parentless children. I was so angry at it all, Ser Selmy was a target I knew wouldn’t retaliate. He was a means to an end. But now I can’t stand to be in the same room as him, for I feel such shame.

I understand how humans can be terrible. So many emotions just build up, and sometimes they’re directed at those who don’t deserve it. I think Lord Samwell understands as well, which is why he forgave you. You’re not cruel, Jon. You made a mistake, and you learned. He sees that, I think. He
knows you’ll keep your oath to him, and if your efforts fail, I know you’ll find another solution. You’re a kind person, Jon Snow, because you regret your mistakes and seek to fix them. Kinder than me.

I wish you luck in your effort. Tell lord Samwell I wish him the best these next months.

Love,

Dany

PS: Please don’t mention Ser Barristan. I should like to look forward.

Eighth Moon, 11th Day

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Dany would never admit it to Jon, but when she read that Prince Oberyn had left them at Horn Hill —before reading the rest of the somber letter—she laughed in way a lady was never supposed to laugh. Great, honking noises and tears were involved.

Tyene had rushed in with a dagger. Dany didn’t know which of them was more shocked: the princess, who has no idea she had one of those, or the maid, who’d been incredulous to learn that the noise was laughter.

Very rude of her, in Dany’s opinion.

“Where did you get that?” Dany asked, pointing at the dagger. It was simple but well made, with an undecorated orange hilt.

Tyene blinked at it, as if only now aware it was in her hand. She hesitated for a moment, then said, “I bought it. …After certain events, m’lady, I thought it a smart investment.”

Dany couldn’t deny that.

When she’d told Tyene about Oberyn, the older girl had rolled her eyes so hard she’d likely hurt herself. “Of course, he has.”

The next three months passed by unevenly, and Dany and Jon exchanged letters six more letters.

Dany’s life had slowed down to a generally boring routine. Now that she had experience, she planned to start getting into contact with the other orphanages soon. Gavin had agreed to help. There were six in King’s Landing, and the one she currently visited was closest to the castle. She was still in the process of convincing cousin Stannis to let her go to the others, but she’d get there.

For his part, Jaime was praying to all his gods that Stannis refusing, since he “didn’t want to waste my time on more urchins!” Dany didn’t think he was being honest. She’d seen him sneak coins to some of the children who choose to leave. And she rather thought he’d grown to enjoy being a teacher—and even grown to like Gavin. Although one couldn’t tell, with how they sniped at each other constantly. Still, she’d heard Jaime call him “Gavin” once—he was calling more and more of them by name, now. Dany hadn’t thought he’d grow to like it, but she was very pleased with the outcome.

Luckily, quite a few of them had agreed to go North! Cousin Stannis would send them on one of his boats along with a guard. They sail to White Harbor and then ride to Moat Cailin. Lord Benjen had prepared work and housing for those Jon and Dany sent, and already plenty were arriving.
hoped they liked it. The boys would keep up their training and aid the builders. They'd be paid for honest work. Dany had tentative plans for the younger children: she wanted to apprentice them, so they gained valuable skills. She just didn’t know how to, yet.

On Jon’s side, things had also fallen into a routine. Jon was making slow but sure progress with Sam. It took some patience and ingenuity, but the boys had fallen into a good rhythm. Apparently, the secret was rewarding him. They’d grown close, and Dany was happy for Jon. He never had to be on guard against Sam.

Domeirc was still acting the fool, which Jon got a lot of pleasure from. She couldn’t wait to hear all about that.

Dany couldn’t wait to hear about a lot of things. Face to face, this time.

*****

Stannis didn’t think he’d ever been this tired.

During the Siege of Storm’s End, when he’d been starved to his bones and forced to eat rats to survive, he’d still felt a constant vigor born of a determination to win. He’d been victorious and did his duty.

When he’d first taken command of Dragonstone, and his people had shown him only false courtesies and impeded his efforts in every way, he’d still met the challenge with his usual stubborn assurance of his rightness. Dragonstone had now become a mightier fortress than ever, and the Houses sworn to it prospered under his rule.

But this past year had taken its toll on him with its sheer, never-ending load of work. He was master of ships, and responsible for the care of the royal fleet. He was Lord of Dragonstone, and responsible for his people’s welfare and overseeing his shipping empire. He was the owner of Aluminum, and responsible for taking and meeting orders—a task that had grown exponentially more difficult as Tobho Mott couldn’t keep up with the sheer number of them. Stannis was privately worried the man would leave soon. Already, Stannis thought he had only stayed this long because the metal was his own discovery and he felt proprietary over it. Considering how deeply indebted Stannis was to the Iron Bank, Mott leaving would ruin him. Stannis knew he had to meet the payments, because if the Bank ever felt that it was time to call in the debt and the crown couldn’t pay…well, the Iron Bank of Braavos always got paid, even if they had to topple empires. Whatever he felt towards Robert now, he was still loyal to his king and country. But if he didn’t find another smith soon, then it was all moot.

Stannis’s responsibilities didn’t end there. He was still in frequent communication with Eddard Stark, and had taken it upon himself to aid the man in his northern restoration plan. The stronger the kingdoms, the stronger the crown, and—privately—Stannis enjoyed their discussions and debates about how to best go about it. Currently, the Northmen were hard at work extending the Kingsroad so it cut horizontally westward under the Northern Mountains, at the edge of House Wull territory. Ned had accepted Stannis aid and when the path was ready, he’d contact the Essosi roadmaker from Myr. To do that, they had to cut through the dark, dense Wolfswood, avoiding wild animals and poisonous plants. Already, a man had been mauled by an angry wolf pack when he’d ventured too far from the camp. It was hard, slow work, but they were doing it despite the obstacles. Wull had even begun plans for a mine, but they were still debating on where to best put it since the mountains were hazardous on the best days. It needed to be accessible even in the depths of winter. The Wulls were looking through the history of the House and noting any mentions of quakes or unstable areas.

To compound all that, Stannis was also a husband and father. He had responsibilities to Myra and
ensuring her comfort, particularly now that she was six months along in her pregnancy. She’s been sleeping often, and Cressen said this babe was proving to be more difficult that Steffon or Ryelle. The stress of that knowledge sometimes kept Stannis awake at nights, staring at his wife and thinking of all the women who had perished in childbirth.

Stannis had, reluctantly, thought of Tywin Lannister. Stannis had no interest in gossip, but it was difficult to avoid the tale of Tywin and Joanna, and how the latter’s death had broken something in the former. What would his life be like, he’d wondered, were Myra not in it? Such a contemplation had proved too much for his peace of mind. He’d drained two full glasses of Davos's Summer Isle rum.

They were keeping Myra’s difficult pregnancy from the children. Cressen doubted there would be any issue during delivery, but Myra was firm in that she didn’t want the possibility to worry them.

“Some babes are difficult,” she’d said, firm, after Cressen’s news. “Steffon and Ryelle were easy but we can’t expect them all to be. I’ll simply rest more often, Stannis. Now banish your frown, husband, and make me laugh.”

He ordered Moon Boy, the royal fool, brought to them at once. Despite the man’s best efforts, however, no laughter was forthcoming. Myra’s mind was more preoccupied than she’d let on.

“Seven hells,” Stannis let out a harsh sigh. Enough, Stannis, worrying is pointless; look for solutions instead. Make a plan and make it well, and everything will follow accordingly. He’d have Cressen research some plan or drink to help Myra sleep longer. If she were better rested, then the pregnancy would be easier on her and the babe. He’d also put his foot down and hire a woman to care for Ryelle in Myra’s place—he knew she would protest, but their daughter was too rambunctious for her now. They’d dismiss the woman in three months, once the babe was born.

Yes, he nodded to himself, good. Stannis stood and strode purposefully out the Master of Ships office. He set course for the library, when Daenerys and Steffon should be having their lessons. He’d tell Cressen about the sleeping draught—and perhaps one to calm the nerves, as well—and order him to send word to Myra’s mother and sister. Surely one of them knew of a woman they could entrust with Ryelle’s care.

He met Ser Davos on the way; he’d been on his way to speak to Stannis. The Lord of Dragonstone wasn’t in the mood to stop, so he tersely told the man to inform him on the way. Davos obediently fell into step beside his lord.

“I’ve been noticing something odd, my lord,” Davos began, hesitant.

Stannis looked at him, “Well?”

“The Lady Daenerys has been acting peculiarly—I think it’s been at least a month, but that’s only when I noticed. It could have been sooner.”

Stannis’s severe face hardened into a frown. “Odd? I’ve noticed no such thing. The girl is merrier than ever, now that she has her project down in the city. Does it have to do with her attempts to covertly convince me to allow her to venture even deeper into this god’s forsaken city? Has she got you doing her work now as well, Davos?”

“No, my lord,” Davos denied—a bit too quickly. Stannis shot him a suspicious look, to which Davos only gave a guilty little half smile in response. “Well, yes, she has approached me about that matter, but it’s not the one I’m speaking of.”
Seven hells, what other plan was that girl concocting? Stannis admitted to being impressed by her ingenuity with those children—they’d be loyal to her for this—even if he hated the fact that she wanted to venture into the city. She had no idea of dangerous it was for her, identity hidden or now. He also appreciated that the trainer’s fee wasn’t coming out of the House coffers—hells, but Syrio’s time had been expensive—and didn’t care to know how she’d convinced Jaime Lannister to do the work for her. Apparently, the lion was going to be a set fixture in their lives. Stannis could understand the man’s reasons for how he’d acted against the former queen—even her own brother had little hope of curbing her—but he’d rather hoped that incident would end Daenerys’s interest in the man. She was too stubborn for that, apparently.

She must have learned that trait from Myra.

“Out with it then, Ser Davos.”

“It could be a coincidence, my lord, but it seems Lady Daenerys always leaves a room if Ser Barristan Selmy enters. I first noticed it in the main courtyard when she was returning from a ride. Then again in the garden—Ser Barristan was accompanying another kingsguard, and the young lady simply rose and left. Finally, I noted it during a practice session. She was seated beside Lord Renly and his companions as they watched the men sparring. Lord Barristan appeared and looked as if he were going to join in. She excused herself and left. That time I saw him staring after her, my lord; he looked rather ill. I think something may have occurred between them.”

Stannis had halted early in the speech and was now frowning severely as he listened to Davos recount the whole matter.

“Have you spoken to Ser Justin? He’s at her side constantly, he’d surely know.”

“I tried, my lord.” Davos seemed nervous. “But…”

“What?” Stannis snapped, his patience near its end.

“Ser Justin said it was ‘the princess’s private business’ and I had to take up the matter with her directly. My lord, I even made the request on in your name, as I knew you’d be interested, and still he denied me. Prior to that incident with the queen, Ser Justin never hesitated to recount the lady’s actions. This is also a behavior I thought would warrant your attention, my lord.”

Stannis exhaled through his nose. Oh yes, he remembered the aftermath of Cersei Lannister’s act. He’d ordered Justin to tell them every last, horrible detail. Myra had thrown a priceless statue of the Mother Above against the wall in rage. Justin had included how Daenerys had ordered him to stand down when the Cersei ordered her men to detain them.

“I owe the princess my life, my lord. I will be true to her—a sword against her enemies.”

Had Justin drawn his blade against the former queen’s men, he’d have been executed. Daenerys saved his life, and it didn’t surprise Stannis that he was loyal to her. What was concerning, however, was that he’d chosen to keep her secrets even from Davos, who’d claimed to be there on Stannis’s orders. It seemed that he’d been so preoccupied with other matters, he hadn’t noticed this small shift in his Household. Such inattention was dangerous.

Loath as Stannis was to admit it, he’d have to write to Eddard and say he couldn’t aid him any further beyond general things. He simply didn’t have enough time to attend to everything.

“I’ll speak with Ser Justin later,” Stannis nodded. “I was on my way to the library to speak with Cressen. We’ll discuss the matter of Lord Commander Barristan Selmy directly with Daenerys.”
He turned back to his path, mentally altering his list of things he needed to do.

They arrived at the library within moments and walked past quiet lords and ladies, and children at their own lessons. They found Daenerys and Steffon seated opposite Cressen, taking notes on his lesson. Justin was at another table, speaking with Daenerys’s maid.

“…it was, oh, about seven hundred years before Aegon’s conquest. The Martells were only a small House during the Rhoynish Wars, but their lord was a clever man. Rather that fight the Rhoynish people, Lord Mors took the warrior Queen Nymeria to wife, and using their combined strength they conquered Dorne. It was then that the southernmost kingdom unified under the leadership of one House. House Martell was renamed House Nymeros Martell, and the cultures of both peoples intermingled. The Rhoynar people—who were Valyrians colonists and shared the empire’s beliefs—kept their tradition primogeniture: the eldest child was the successor no matter their gender. This is why the current heir is the Princess Arianne Nymeros Martell, and not her younger brother, Prince Quentyn.”

Steffon wrinkled his nose. “That’s a weird tradition. My friends say the Dornish are all crazy, and that a girl can’t rule like a man. They’re not as smart.”

Daenerys turned to him, incredulous. Stannis winced. “‘Not as smart?!’ I only had to listen to this lesson once to remember it—this is your third time.”

“It’s boring!” Steffon said, defensively. Then shot Cressen a guilty look before pouting at Daenerys. “And I didn’t mean you, Dany. You’re not really a girl.”

Davos coughed suspiciously. Stannis sighed—his son had inherited some of his worst traits. He’d hoped the boy would take after Myra in eloquence.

Daenerys looked even angrier. “Not a—!” It seemed words were too much because she simply turned and shoved Steffon off the bench. The eight-year-old let out a strangled squeak as he sailed off and hit the carpeted floor. Stannis figured the boy deserved it. Daenerys scowled down at him. “Humph!”

Daenerys inherited the Targaryen temper.

“This is what I meant!” Steffon groused, scowling as he pushed to his feet. Stannis noted how he keeping a wary distance. “You’re too mean to be a normal girl. Maybe it’s only the Valyrian girls who are different—maybe that’s why the Dornish let girls rule. They’d push the boys off things if they didn’t.”

Stannis thought that was actually a pretty accurate assessment.

“Maester Cressen,” Stannis finally stepped forward. “If my son requires a lesson to be given three times, perhaps he’s spending too much time listening to these opinionated friends of his and his lessons should be doubled.”

Steffon’s eyes widened. “Father! No, I promise I’ll pay attention!”

Stannis pat the boy on the head. “I need a moment with Maester Cressen. You and Daenerys go find a book on the origins of House Martell and bring it back. You’ll be quizzed on it and the maester will report both scores to me.”

“Yes, father!”

“Okay, cousin.”
Stannis didn’t miss the sly look she shot Steffon before they both took off. Ser Justin quickly followed, bowing to Stannis as he passed.

Stannis took the time they were gone to tell Cressen about the sleeping draught and relay his instructions. His business was done by the time the children returned. Daenerys was clutching an orange book and Steffon complaining that it wasn’t fair that she got to read it first. Children.

“Daenerys, I’d like to speak with you.” Stannis stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking down at the girl. She reluctantly handed the book to a triumphant Steffon and followed him and Davos to a nearby table.

“I haven’t done anything yet!” she said as they sat, turning to shoot Ser Justin a suspicious look. Stannis only sighed—he’d deal with the ‘yet’ another time. He really needed to speak to Justin.

“Ser Davos has noted your recent behavior, Daenerys. Did anything occur with Ser Barristan?”

She winched—and Stannis knew that something had. Whenever Daenerys looked guilty and a bit mulish, she’d done something she regretted by didn’t want to admit to. Myra and Stannis had received that look often over the years. His first memory of it was when he’d found her five-year-old self trapped atop the stone dragons that guarded Dragonstone’s main gate. She’d disappeared for hours, apparently on a mad quest to be a dragonrider “like her ancestors.” Myra figured she’d also been acting out because Steffon’s birth divided the lady’s attention.

The event had given Stannis cause to drink. Thankfully, she understood her own situation in King’s Landing and hadn’t done such a thing in the Red Keep. It hadn’t stopped her other acts, such as this recent quest of hers to reunite him and Renly. It was a useless endeavor. Stannis had his reasons for keeping his distance from the youngest Baratheon brother. Some relationships were poisoned by too much history to ever salvage. Trying was only a waste of time.

Daenerys hunched her shoulders—a small, petulant scowl on her lips. “Ser Davos saw it wrong. There’s no problem, cousin.”

“Ser Davos, recount your story, and we’ll assess its accuracy.”

The knight, a bit apologetic, explained the three events he’d witnessed. Daenerys had little reaction until Davos mentioned Ser Barristan’s wounded expression, whereupon her face lost the little color it had. She licked her bottom lip and looked down at the table.

“Does Ser Davos speak falsely, Daenerys?”

A small shake of her head.

“Tell me, then. What happened?”

She shifted in discomfort, and he saw her cheeks flush. When she finally glanced up, her expression was ashamed. She told Stannis and Davos the whole, detailed story of how she’d gotten Jaime Lannister excused from his morning duties. Stannis was grim by the end of the tale, but it was Davos’s disappointment that she couldn’t quite look at.

Stannis had been remiss in her education.

"Your actions were uncalled for."

“I wanted to help the children!” she protested, immediately defensive. “And Jaime was the perfect __”
“Ser Justin would have taught them, had you ordered him to. He is loyal to you to the point of keeping your secrets from his liege lord. Did you ask this of him?”

She faltered, blinking as if she hadn’t even considering the possibility. She looked back at the knight in question, unsure. He and her maid were having a furious discussion, glancing over often.

“But…” she looked back at Stannis, mouth opening and closing. “But I wanted Jaime to—”

“Jaime Lannister killed his king—your father—” she flinched away, eyes huge. But this was a lesson she needed to learn. “And yet you offer him chance after chance to prove himself. Barristan Selmy has done more for the Targaryens than any other knight alive, and yet you scorn him repeatedly.”

She drew herself up, anger darkening her eyes and twisting her expression. “Jaime saved everyone! He had to kill father. You found the wildfire yourself, cousin! You told us it was true.”

Stannis nodded at that. “Yes, Jaime Lannister saved this city...when he killed King Aerys’s pyromancer. However, the king was frail and lost in his delusions by that point. He was also unprotected. With the pyromancer dead, the wildfire plot was felled. Killing the king was separate from that. Ser Jaime could have simply detained him: He chose otherwise.”

Daenerys stared at him as if he’d spoken another language. For many moments, it was complete silence between them. She sat perfectly still, only blinking occasionally. Davos released a sad sigh, looking away. Seven Hells, Stannis didn’t want to be the one to ruin these illusions of hers. She was young, and all children grew up and reassessed their logic to see the inconstancies in their past thoughts. Jaime Lannister’s actions were not as noble as she’d built up in her mind, and she’d have realized it herself, one day. But she was making excuses for her unjust actions, which had the potential to make her dangerous enemies, and as her lord and guardian, it was his responsibility to educate her.

Finally, Daenerys slumped and her eyes filled with tears. Stannis wavered—he’d spent ten years of his life trying to ensure this girl remained happy. Yet he’d caused this. He steeled himself. This is necessary.

“He didn’t have to kill father,” she whispered. “But...but Jaime said it was because of the wildfire... I...?” she looked up uncertainly, searching. “I asked him. He said it was because of the wildfire.”

Stannis pressed his lips together. “I cannot say I know his mind. Perhaps he really thinks it was the only way. Perhaps he was trying to justify his actions by hiding his real reason behind a good one. Perhaps he’d fallen into a warrior’s haze. Sometimes in battle, when the blood runs hot, men forget themselves and may lose minutes or hours.”

“Why did you invite him to Dragonstone?” she asked, eyes watery. “I thought—I thought it was because you approved of him...That’s why I...”

Stannis was honestly startled at the admission. He was responsible for her constant interest in the knight? But he’d only...Seven hells, he could see it. He could understand why his actions had motivated her attachment to the man. On the other hand, he’d never expressed any praise or interest for The Bold, had he?

Stannis exhaled slowly. “His actions saved the city, and I acknowledge that. I felt...uncomfortable, knowing I’d judged him without learning the full tale. And he’s a Kingsguard; he’d spread the news to the castle. So, I invited him to Dragonstone.”

“I thought you liked Jaime,” she whispered. She stared down at the table, lip trembling. She nodded.
“I’m a fool.”

“My feelings for Jaime Lannister are not under query here, Daenerys, nor are they the point. I tell you this to show you the flaw in your logic: you decided Ser Jaime is ‘better’ than Ser Barristan without critically examining the facts, and then used your flawed reasoning as justification for your actions.” She hunched down further. “Look up, Daenerys. You’re a lady—a princess of royal blood, and you acted unjustly. Wipe your tears and face your actions.”

She sniffed a couple of times and dragged her sleeve across her tearstained cheeks. She met his gaze determinedly. Stannis considered her carefully. He had a point to get across, but how to best…

“Davos, have you ever told the princess the story of how you lost those fingers?”

Both looked startled by the change in topic, and their eyes went directly to Ser Davos’s gloved left hand, which largely concealed the fact that every finger has been cut until the first joint. Daenerys frowned in confusion, shaking her head no.

“Oh,” Davos said, shooting Stannis an understanding look. He leaned back and turned to Daenerys. “You see, my princess, before I was head of House Seaworth, I was a smuggler from Flea Bottom. A criminal who’d been under the eyes of the City Watch for years. During the Rebellion, I heard of a lucrative opportunity: the Tyrell army had been laying siege to Storm’s End for nearly a year. The Redwyne fleet’s blockade of Shipbreaker Bay impeded any food from entering the Keep, and its people were starving.”

Daenerys glanced at Stannis uncertainly; she knew this story. But she didn’t interrupt.

“If I could get past the ships, I thought to myself, the people of Storm’s End would pay me handsomely. So, I filled a small boat with onions and salted fish, and in the dead of night slowly, carefully slipped between the large ships and entered the castle. The reward was lucrative, indeed; Lord Stannis knighted me after the siege and awarded me rich lands on Cape Wrath.”

“It’s why you’re called the onion knight,” she piped up, smiling a little. “It’s why the House Seaworth sigil is an onion.”

He smiled. “Couldn’t have a fish, my lady. The Tullys would have taken offence, I should think.”

She giggled, face regaining some colour.

“But you see, even though Lord Stannis rewarded my actions and later raised me to a position as his advisor—not everyday a boy from Flea Bottom is awarded such an honor—I was still a smuggler, and Lord Stannis is a just and fair man.” Davos removed his glove, showing her the scared stubs. Daenerys frowned in sympathy. “So after he knighted me and became my lord, his first act was to punish me for my crimes.”

Daenerys gasped, mouth falling opened. She swung her head to Stannis so fast a lock of pinned up hair came free. Her eyes were huge as she blurted, “You cut off his fingers!”

Her exclamation was loud and drew the attention of numerous tables. He stared them all down until they meekly looked away. Her cheeks flushed.

“I did,” Stannis acknowledged.

“But…but he saved you,” she said, perplexed. “You’ve said to me that Ser Davos is the most honest man you’ve ever met. Why would you…?”
“Because when you are lord of a keep, you are responsible for your people—you reward the good and punish the bad. Every person under your preview—be they highborn or bastards, man or woman, friend or foe—is to be judged equally. That’s the weight that comes with highborn blood. You’re to be the Lady of Moat Cailin: you cannot choose favorites amongst your people and sacrifice a man you dislike for a man you do. Just like I chose to spare Clayton Sugg’s sword hand, though I dislike the man immensely. Justice is not reliant on emotions—it is based on logic. The actions of a lord and lady should also be founded on a careful, unbiased examination of events.”

Daenerys swallowed, but she was listening carefully now, finally facing her guilt. Her willingness to listen and learn is what Stannis valued most. His ward had a strong sense of justice, but it was sometimes overshadowed by her emotions. The main problem was that his ward had the tendency to act and then look away from the consequences if they made her uncomfortable. She needed the occasional prod to get her to face the past. A person with the power to decide others’ fates couldn’t be allowed to be raised unchecked.

That’s how the Joffreys of the world were made.

“Ser Barristan has done you no harm.” She nodded in acknowledgement, saddened. “He has done more for your family that any other alive. He upheld his oath for untold years, but that oath died when Robert took the throne. Yes, he chose to live and serve another king, but all men deserve choices. Honorable or not, it is not your right to punish him for them. Do you understand?”

Daenerys swallowed hard, but this time her eyes were dry. She took a deep breath and nodded. Her back was straight and her gaze true. “Yes, my lord. I understand.” Another breath. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “I’m going to apologize. I—I didn’t even bother to speak to him, not in all these years. I spoke to Jaime about why he killed father, but not Ser Barristan about why he swore himself to the king. I judged him without knowing him. So, I’m going to apologize.”

Stannis softened. A hard lesson, but a needed one. Ser Davos smiled at her proudly, and she gave a tentative grin back.

Daenerys looked up at Stannis, examining him. “Do you think my plan is fair, cousin?”

“I do. A commendable decision.”

“So…does this mean in the future, before making a decision about someone, I should seek all the facts? Every time?”

“If your actions can impact them, then yes,” he nodded.

“Even if I don’t like them, I have to hear them out?”

“Yes.”

“So…doesn’t that mean that you should hear Lord Renly out?” Her gaze was innocent. “Before you judge him forever?”

Stannis froze. Davos turned away with a cough.

“That is a different matter,” he ground out. Seven hells.

“You’re ignoring him, cousin,” she pointed out. “And Lord Renly—your brother—has told me that you have not spoken of anything but business since he came to the capital. That you didn’t speak to him at all since leaving Storm’s End. That was ten years ago.”
“Curse you, Renly.”

“Daenerys,” he warned, something like panic building.

“He was six, cousin! I don’t know what happened, but you should speak about it. You said you should get all the facts before making a decision that can impact another. You said it’s commendable to do so! Lord Renly is hurt, I know he is! Just like Jaime was, when no one bothered to ask for his reasons. You said you were uncomfortable when you judged Jaime too soon—isn’t this the same?”

“This is not the same!” he defended. "Daenerys, this matter—"

“Don’t be a hypocrite, cousin,” she muttered, mulishly raising her chin.

His jaw dropped.

Davis exploded into a coughing fit, his whole body shaking. Laughter periodically broke through before he managed to turn them into coughs. Stannis glared at him. I should have taken more fingers.

With some difficulty, he turned back to Daenerys’s expectant, wide-eyed gaze. “Myra wants it too,” she added, and seven hells this girl would be the death of him. With the state Myra was in, he’d go along way to see her pleased. It was almost as if the girl knew it.

Stannis ground his teeth, searching for a way out of this that didn’t come across as hypocritical. He found none. He’d wished Jon Snow luck once, when she’d only been four. He should have wished himself some as well.

“Alright,” he forced out with some difficulty, seeing as his teeth were tightly. “I will…invite Renly to dinner. Soon. And we will… discuss matters.”

Daenerys brightened immediately. “Oh, I know you’ll make up, cousin. Lord Renly is so nice! He’s nice to everyone. He even says thank you to the servants! You’re brothers—isn’t that wonderful?” she sighed a bit wistfully, unwillingly eliciting his sympathy. Damn it all.

“I thought about the problems between you and the king, as well,” she mentioned, scrunching her brows. After a moment, she shrugged, “But I can’t fix everything.”

****

Dear Dany,

I’ve failed. Sam and I tried so hard to impress Lord Tarly. Months and months of effort. But I was wrong, Dany—this man hates his son. The bond between them irreparable, it was severed years ago by scorn and bitterness. I was hopeful, at first, because Sam has improved so much. He has even lost much of his weight, as would anyone who spend four months dedicated to change. He will never be a great fighter, and he still cannot resist his impulse to retreat in the face of combat, but he is adequate enough not to humiliate himself. Furthermore, his intellect more than makes up for it. I think he’d be a good lord, Dany.

Lord Tarly refuses to see any of Sam’s good points. I don’t think he ever will. All Sam’s efforts he either ignores or criticizes. I’ve met dozens of heirs, Dany, and Sam is perfectly adequate. Lord Tarly has his mind set against Sam.

Do you remember what you told me in your letter, several months ago? You said everyone should have a choice. I thought that meant that Sam should be able to choose to change. I thought prince Oberyn’s lesson was that I’m no god, to be able to change someone so quickly. I was wrong in both
Sam doesn’t need to change so he fits his destined future, Sam needs to choose his own. This will be my last letter to you for some time, Dany. Forgive me, but I have to do this before the prince returns. The Tyrells and the Arryns have accepted our trade. Our House won’t suffer, I vow it, nor will our reputation. No one but you will know my part in this.

We’re running away, Dany. Sam’s going to be a Maester.

Love,

Jon.

PS: I hope you like your birthday present.

Twelfth Month, 3rd Day.

Chapter End Notes

Jon’s actions when he was training Sam here may make some readers uncomfortable, or seem OOC. I considered this part for a long time but eventually decided to include it. Jon is a good person who wants to help others, but he is only human and stress can bring out the worst in us. He’s only 11 and thought he was responsible for Sam's future. Jon also has to learn lessons about looking for other ways to do things, and about discussing his reasoning with others rather than just making their choices for them. He also needed to see that highborn or lowborn doesn't matter, its about meeting someone else's standards. Plus, I thought him coming to a conclusion where he realizes that rules are wrong and they should go they own path fits insubordinate Jon Snow X’D

Also! This is what Oberyn and his daughters look like <3
https://prokrik.deviantart.com/art/Dornish-family-photo-630019306

Hope you enjoyed it :)}
In a way, Jon had seen Samwell Tarly as an…opportunity. A chance to change the world, a chance to challenge a deeply held belief and prove—to himself, to Sam, to Lord Tarly, to everyone—that if you put enough effort into something, you could open the doors that history had slammed in your face. That you could win the position you’d been denied without the need for treachery or deceit.

*Sam can fit in. Sam can get what was owed him. Sam… can make his father proud.*

He’d thought Oberyn’s lesson was *patience*—that change cannot happen overnight. Hadn’t Syrio said this was Jon’s main fault, something he’d bemoaned to the day they parted? The water dancer was a man that believed how one wielded their weapon—and what that weapon was—spoke much. So, he’d thought Obeyrn had left them at Horn Hill as another attempt to tame Jon’s impatience and curb his arrogance: two of many reasons he’d allowed his temper to escape him.

But he should have known that Oberyn didn’t care about that, considering he himself was both arrogant and impatient. That was never the lesson.

He’d been so slow to realize the truth. He’d been so set on this path—the dichotomous trap he’d fallen into—that he hadn’t stopped to consider the true problem. Watching Sam slowly transform into a version of himself that fit the mould of “lord” opened his eyes.

That had been Oberyn’s intent all along; because Jon was stubborn. Had he not seen it for himself, he’d have left Horn Hill even more embittered towards society and convinced of the inherent evils of the South.

Jon had spent almost every waving hour in these past four months by Sam’s side, teaching himself what Lord Randyll expected of a Lord of Horn Hill, and then helping Sam attain those goals.

After making a set of goals, Jon and Sam got to work. He spent hours by Sam’s side; training with the sword and bow and lance. Countless afternoons spent in the great hall, quietly watching Lord Randyll decide the fate of his lands and mitigate disputes between his people. Dozens of books memorized about the history of Horn Hill and the alliances and politics and schemes that raised and kept the Tarlys in power. Hundreds of careful conversations—using every bit of the social graces Lady Catelyn had hammered into him—with Lord Randyll’s visiting vassals: he knew their lands, their problems, the state of their families. Discussing those conversations later and gently critiquing Sam’s tone and questions and posture.

By Samwell Tarly’s side, Jon had seen what the future held for his friend.

Jon had found that he’d enjoyed the experience; it reminded him of doing similar tasks by Robb’s side, those brief few months lord Stark had brought the boys to shadow him and learn what a northern lord ought to be. But that had been before he’d ventured south to stay with uncle Benjen at the moat, and his return to Winterfell and subsequent departure with Oberyn had allowed for no
more lessons. From what Jon had seen, the people of the Reach required much greater intervention from their liege lord to settle petty disputes, while the Northerners only went to his father with grave issues, like upholding the king’s justice. On the one hand, this made ruling in the south more tedious, and the important matters were left unattended for too long. On the other, it ensured the southern lords were more aware of all the issues facing their lands and more knowledgeable on the state of his people.

He wondered if this difference was because the winters had created an isolationist culture in the North, making the northerners more inclined to solve their issues alone. Old Nan used to say that in the very heart of winter, when the snows were one hundred foot high and the gates were blocked, one could almost believe nothing existed beyond the walls of Winterfell. Children born in winters were shocked when, come spring, they finally ventured out, while summer brats grew claustrophobic from the sense of being trapped. In stark contrast, Horn Hill’s winters were comparable to the temperature Jon had experienced in his months at the Wall, so the people here were nearly always in each others’ crosshairs.

Jon, having experience in both settings, estimated that a large, influential decision in the South would take months of debate and years of implementation, while in the North it would happen relatively quickly. Of course, the Southerners would get more of a say in matters, while the Northerners would be expected to silently obey the edict.

Different worlds, different challenges, Jon mused.

Having a better idea of the challenges of being a southern lord Jon had—bitterly, in the privacy of his own mind—acknowledged that Randyll was a good one. His lands were prosperous, his people were fed and sheltered, and his House was in the height of power. While Lord Randyll’s treatment of lawbreakers tended to be much harsher than necessary (two months ago, when a horse thief had rejected the Wall, Lord Randyll had ordered both his legs cut off to the knee) he was a fair man overall.

It was only towards Samwell his wits were blinded by hatred.

Slowly, as Sam improved at the sword, grew comfortable in the saddle, and became adequate in conversation, Jon’s sliver of hope grew. By the end of the eleventh month, Sam had even begun to physically look more like his younger brother, Dickon, as the hours of exertion burned his weight away. His previously small features were now more apparent in his leaner face.

Due to all these changes, which should improve his father’s view of him, Jon thought Sam’s happiness would increase alongside his other skills.

And yet, while Jon enjoyed the lessons, Sam… wilted from them. When once he’d chatter excitedly during their morning lecture with the maester, now Sam was almost despondent. Every day he contributed less, and each time with less enthusiasm, to the point where Maester Asten had asked if he was ill. Sam had also shed the bright and lively fabrics he preferred in favour of muted colours and styles, another mimic of Lord Randyll. He stopped going to help the cooks in favour of memorising the laws of the land. He traded dancing for sword practice. He spent his evenings forcing himself to ride horses, rather than living vicariously through his stories of heroes on horseback.

Sam was growing…smaller.

“Are you well?” Jon whispered, shooting Sam a glance. The other boy had dark circled under his eyes.
Sam flicked his eyes towards him, smiling weakly, before returning his attention to his father. “Yes, I just...well, I didn’t sleep very well. I kept thinking of...the future, I suppose.” Randyll was listening to a border dispute between a small lord and a newly landed knight. There was a river dividing their lands, and both wanted sole ownership. Both insisted the other should pay a fee to access the water.

“You won’t go to the Wall, Sam,” Jon swore, fierce, although he was in no position to make such a promise. But he felt he must believe it—if only so Sam could.

He only got another weak smile in response, Sam’s attention never waning. And yet...his shoulders sagged, briefly. At that moment, Sam looked as if he carried the weight of the world.

Misery was vivid on his face.

Remembering the event, Jon could almost thank Randyll Tarly for his actions early in the twelfth month. Jon had been growing increasingly cognisant of his impending departure. So, nervous but hopeful, he and Sam had organized an exhibition of sorts for Lord Randyll. They’d show him Sam’s newly minted martial skills, and then...well, and then Jon hoped the lord of Horn Hill would finally perceive his son as a worthy successor. That his interest in Sam would be rekindled.

A part of Jon knew it was only a pipe dream.

Sam had openly worked hard for four months, training in the yard every evening, yet Lord Randyll had never given him a single glance. The traits Randyll prized above all others would never be in Sam’s nature; he was not brave and brash and robust like Dickon. Skills could be taught, but one’s inherent personality was...a complex beast.

The morning of the exhibition, they gathered in the great courtyard. Sam stood before the master-at-arms, fidgeting and nervous. Jon stood to the side, watching with sweating palms and an inextinguishable sense of dread. Lord Randyll stood near the main entrance, mouth set in an impatient line, while at his side Lady Melessa had her hands clamped tightly before her. The event had garnered the attention of a large group of servants and guards, who milled about the courtyard making half-hearted efforts to seem as if they were attending to their duties. In the tower to their left, Jon could see Sam’s sisters and brother. Lady Talla was gripping the still with bloodless hands.

And then the master-at-arms had thrown a practice sword Sam’s way...and Sam had flinched. It was a brief, negligent mistake; he’d fumbled and caught it successfully.

Randyll Tarly had turned around and left.

The silence in the yard had been oppressive. Sam had stood there, before dozens of pitying or scornful gazes, for many quiet moments. Lady Melessa covered her mouth with her hand, and her face was a mixture of anger and agony. Finally, she turned away and left, and if not being able to bare the truth. The rest of the people followed suit, unable to bear the painful second-hand embarrassment of being so quickly and brutally dismissed. As the yard emptied, Sam grew progressively paler as the implication hit him at the same moment it hit Jon.

It was too late. It had probably been too late years ago. All their efforts were built upon a fools dream. Syrio said Jon lacked patience, that he swung his sword before he knew the enemy, and in this case, the oft-bemoaned words proved true; Lord Randyll had made up his mind years ago and Jon had only been fooling himself. Sam could be the perfect lord and once upon a time that would have pleased his father, but not anymore. Not as long as he was Sam...Randyll had been humiliated too many times to ever allow it again.

From his conversations with the man’s vassals, Jon had gleaned that Samwell had made Randyll into
an unacknowledged joke among the Reachmen; Old Tarly can’t even control his own son, great lord he is. Apparently, Lord Mace himself—named a fool by his own mother—had once publicly laughed at Randyll after Lord Redwyne had rejected Sam twice over: both as a page and as a son-in-law. Jon understood the Reach a lot better now: House Tarly was a rich, prosperous House with a long history. They were allegedly descended from the legendary Garth Greenhand, the so-called High King of the First Men and the figure to which every Reach House scrambled to claim kinship. Sam’s lineage was pristine, and he was set to inherit one of the most powerful Houses of the Reach. By all accounts, Lord Redwyne should have been more than happy to accept Sam’s suit. Yet, father and son had barely stayed at House Redwyne for a fortnight before sailing home. A man Lord Tarly’s pride wouldn’t take such humiliation lightly, especially if a son he may have once loved was the source.

None of it was fair. A better man, a better father, would have told the wagging tongues to go to the Others and embraced his son’s talents and built upon them. And today, he’d have been grateful and relieved at the change in Sam. But then…the fact that Jon—a northerner bastard, and only a boy, at that—had succeeded where Randyll had failed probably burned even worse.

Jon wondered if Sam’s finch had just been an excuse Randyll could rationalize—my son is still a coward; he’s no lord—so he could continue with his plans to cleanly disinherit him. Jon understood, on an intellectual level, his reasons. Had Jon heard of it from the outside, he may even have sympathized or pitied Lord Tarly.

But Jon Snow was Sam’s friend, and Lord Tarly’s rejection fueled the rage that was simmering just under the surface.

He should have been panicking. Should have been furiously thinking of ways to deny this reality, to find some other method to change Sam’s fate. And yet, seeming Sam there, standing alone with his sword hanging at his side, dressed as a poor mimic of Randyll Tarly… Jon realized what an ill-fitting image it was.

Then again, perhaps he was so angry that he wanted to reject everything that had rejected Sam. That had rejected him.

Others take Randyll Tarly.

“Sam?” the rage was there, in the tone. Brown eyes flicked towards him, and he seemed to wake up. Immediately, shame turned his face red and alarm widened his eyes. Jon wondered what his face looked like at that moment. Sam hunched, the sword trembling in his ill-fitting grip, mimicking his quivering lip. “I…I’m sorry, Jon…I-I tried, I did so much and I’ll never forget—” His lips began to tremble, but he didn’t cry. Sam hadn’t cried …since that horrible day he’d learned the truth. “I tried to be who he wanted.”

Suddenly, that fact seemed like a terrible thing.

Jon grabbed Sam’s arm and all but dragged him behind, making his way through the eastern gate and into the quiet gods wood, mind spinning and anger roiling. Finally, when they reached a small river with a set of flat stones, he turned to Sam, who cringed from the sudden motion. The water would block any prying ears.

“Sam,” he said, quiet but firm. “Do you want to be Lord of Horn Hill?”

Samwell stilled completely, it seemed as if even his breath stopped. For many seconds, the river and
Then Sam began to cry. With a great, gasping sob he collapsed onto his knees, blubbering and more like *Samwell* than he’d been in *months*. His face turned red and ran with tears and snot, and his voice, when he finally spoke, was a raspy, cracked thing. “I just don’t want to go to the *Wall*, Jon,” he keened.

And that was all the answer Jon needed.

His heart filled with *purpose*. His lungs with the first deep breath he’d taken in *months*. And perhaps he was just very, very angry. So angry he burned with it, so angry he *hated* Randyll Tarly for being the implacable, prideful man he was. So angry that his vision of merry lord Sam was well and truly dead.

Their world wasn’t a maiden’s song or a boy’s epic fable.

Just then, Jon felt he suddenly understood what the lesson was. The one Oberyn had wanted to teach him all along. He didn’t like Oberyn’s methods—hated them!—but he also couldn’t deny that by forcing Jon to stumble along, he’d never *forget*.

House Tarly’s sigil was a hunter and it would never fit Sam: because he didn’t *want* it. And, to be brutally frank, his personality was entirely a mismatch. Jon could admit it now that all was said and done: Sam didn’t have what it took to keep his House strong. The Lords of the Reach would have devoured him.

He kneeled and clasped Sam on the shoulders. The boy looked up, his face blotchy and breath heaving. “Then meet me at the stables an hour past midnight.”

“W-what?” Sam whispered, eyes wide.

“We’re running away, Sam.” Jon declared, anger and spite fueling his determination. “The Others take lord Tarly and his *expectations*.”

Samwell was a character in the wrong story.

*****

*Is this who I am?* Jon wondered, hours later as he stood in front of Domeric Bolton’s door. Anger had driven him here, his temper had long since cooled and now his stomach churned with doubts and fears. He’d made a plan, sent a letter to Dany as a promise of commitment, and now went to Domeric Bolton seeking aid.

*I miss the days where my greatest concern was how many rocks Oberyn would have me lift come nightfall.*

He knocked, the sound loud in the silence. He looked around, paranoid of some servant spying from the shadows. But the hall was still and empty, all the doors closed.

*Careful, Jon,* cautioned the budding politician. *Slow steps.*

It was nearing midnight, and Dom answered his door dressed in small clothes, his black hair free about his shoulders. Behind him a candle burned, illuminating a perfectly made bed and spartan, organized room. On the small table before the window, an open book, parchment, and quill sat precisely arranged before a lone chair.
Domeric scanned him up and down, noting his cloaked form—dressed for riding—and the pack on his back. Dom raised a brow and stepped aside. Jon made his way to the table and sat as Dom quietly closed the door. The room smelled of soap and flowers, and an undertone of burnt sugar.

Olad. Dom hates sweets.

Odd. Jon looked down and studied the drawing of a plant as Domeric made his way across the room and sat on his bed, one leg over the other, hands clasped patiently and resting on his knee. Jon ignored him in favour of the book, giving himself a moment to gather his thoughts. On the page was a description of the plant—a blue flower—and its properties. Since Dom had nearly given himself a rash (and because he was bored overall and reluctant to spend time around Sam) he’d taken to thoroughly researching plants and their medicinal properties. This included various poisons and antidotes, for reasons that Jon would rather not think about too deeply. As if to mock him, his eyes fell upon Domeric’s notes, which described how to properly dry the leaves of the plant and the best method to grind them into powder. It didn’t say what the powder would do.

By all the gods… “Could you make this any harder?” He motioned to the book, frowning. “I feel like I’ve come to the lair of some evil sorcerer.”

Dom smiled his usual smile, one that bent his lips but didn’t touch his eyes. “Do you need a magic potion, Jon?”

“Nothing so complicated,” he muttered. Jon took a breath, and then it all came rushing out. The exhibition, which Dom didn’t attend because he didn’t care; Randyll’s reaction, which Dom likely expected; Jon’s realization about Oberyn’s real lesson, which earned him another raised brow. Sometimes Jon wanted to get a razor, hold Domeric down, and shave those cursed eyebrows. He shook the ridiculous thought away.

He had a plan, a dangerous plot that needed careful minding. He did his best to ignore the anxiety crawling up his throat, to hold that picture of Randyll Tarly walking away.

He met Dom’s gaze, angry and petulant. Careful.

“Sam doesn’t belong here; he’ll be sent away no matter what. That was the Prince’s lesson, wasn’t it? That I’d never sway Lord Randyll, that some men don’t change,” the last part was said with bitterness. “Sam can’t stay here, Dom. I’m going to help him get away.” He explained how he and Sam planned to meet at the stables at nightfall, where they would take a couple of horses and venture south. A caravan headed to Old Town had passed through Horn Hill a day ago, and Jon was sure they could catch up to them and pay them to take Sam along. Then, Jon would quickly sneak back into the castle the following night with no one the wiser.

“I just need you to tell everyone I’m ill—something contagious. To go to the maester and get medicine for—for whatever illness you think best. I’ll be back before they think to check.”

It was a meagre cover and Jon knew it. Sam’s qualms and arguments had made that clear.

Part of him didn’t want to go this way, but he’d already committed to doing something—both to Sam and to Dany; he couldn’t go back on his word.

“I won’t help you,” Domeric responded, his tone indicating that it was a foregone conclusion. He got up, hands clasped behind his back, and smiled. “Now, I have a book to finish, so if there’s nothing else…?”

“No one will know it was us!” Jon protested. “I’ve thought of it—I’ll help him to the caravan, then
come right back.”

Domeric leaned against his bedframe, his moon-eyes inscrutable.

“You’ll be discovered immediately, and I’m not involving myself in this. Should Lord Randyll ask of your whereabouts, I’ll simply say ‘I don’t know.’ I’m not placing my House and reputation at risk.” He shook his head. “Have you already turned your back on your House and vow to stay useful, Jon Snow? Have you forgotten the moss?”

“As I said,” Jon protested, but it was weaker, plagued with doubt. “He won’t find out.”

The two regarded each other, Dom with cool patience, Jon with heart-pounding uncertainty. Careful.

“You’ll take a couple of horses, find the caravan, and then return?” Dom asked.

Jon nodded.

“And when Samwell’s absence is noticed,” Domeric continued, composed as ever, “and lord Tarly makes inquiries, won’t the stable boy mention how two horses were missing, before one reappeared a day later? And he will notice, and mention it, because that’s the type of household Randyll Tarly has trained. He’ll naturally conclude that Sam had help. Who would Lord Tarly then have cause to be suspicious of, besides the boy who has befriended his son and spent month aiding? Especially after his blatant dismissal of your efforts? He’d seek you out, find you gone, and my blatant lie would be uncovered within seconds.”

Jon frowned. “Fine then, one horse.”

Dom patiently asked, “And what will you do with it? Leave it with Samwell? Then how will you return in time? Maybe you can leave it in the village—sell it to some peasant? You can’t very well use your own steed. Of course, then there would be a witness to remember the boy with Stark features selling an evidently valuable horse—only the best, for Randyll Tarly.” Dom tilted his head, contemplative. Domeric lived as if life was a puzzle to master, but if he had one true fault it was that he wanted an audience to his cleverness. “It wouldn’t take the lowborn long to realize one of their own had come into possession of a prized mount. Lord Randyll has an iron hold over his people; he’d hear as soon as he noted Sam’s absence and sent men to question the smallfolk. He’d identify you in a heartbeat if brought here. So, maybe just let the beast go free, then? But if it’s found and brought back, Lord Randyll will question why Samwell took the horse at all, only to leave it so close to the village.”

Jon stared at the other boy, scowling.

“Of course, the entire thing will be pointless,” Dom continued. “Lord Randyll will think of the caravan as soon as Samwell’s disappearance is noted—which will be quick, considering how attentive the Lady is to her son. He’ll send men to bring the boy back before the meandering caravan even approaches Old Town. He’ll punish Samwell harshly for his daring, and—if he hasn’t discovered it himself—hear of your duplicity from Samwell’s own lips.”

“Sam wouldn’t do that,” Jon snapped.

Domeric just stared at him. “I doubt your…friend has a very high threshold for pain.”

Jon opened his mouth to say Sam’s father wouldn’t go that far…but couldn’t force the lie out. This was a man who’d chained his seven-year-old son to a wall for three days.

“I promised him,” Jon asserted, quiet but sure. “I said I’d help and I will.”
Domeric sighed, crossing his arms. “Samwell Tarly was born to a position men envy, his every need met, yet he chose his own selfish desires over fulfilling his side of the social contract. And now, after that short-sighted selfishness has condemned him, he passively waits for a saviour. If he truly wants to leave, give him coin without risking yourself. Be pragmatic and wash your hands of any misplaced guilt.”

Jon just shook his head.

“It's not guilt, Dom. He’s my friend, and that means something to me.” Domeric frowned; he didn’t understand that logic and never would. “I won’t argue with you about Sam’s choices; he was a child with a father that would rather torment him than try to see his value.” Domeric had an absolutist way of seeing the world, and in his eyes, Sam should have changed and become whomever society expected. If Sam couldn’t survive alone, then Dom figured he didn’t deserve to.

But even Domeric would find discomfort in being denied his pastimes: horses chief amongst them. It was only human to want to spend your time doing something fulfilling.

As cruel as Domeric’s words were, he had a point about Sam’s character. Jon felt he had to help Sam personally because a part of him believed that if he left Sam to his own devices, he’d put off running away until he one day found himself on a wagon bound for the Wall.

“Jon, I don’t think—I want to go, I do, but this…what if we get caught? Gods Jon, my father…he’d punish me so harshly...what if...what if he finds out and sends me to the wall early, Jon? And think of what he’d do to you; you’d pay restitution, somehow, and I know how important your reputation is, you moss and lady Daenerys… Gods, Jon maybe we shouldn’t—”

“We should, and we will,” Jon snapped. He had to write to Dany, he had to tell her he was leaving. He wasn’t afraid of Randyll Tarly!

Sam slumped. “You don’t—you don’t have to do this for me. I—I’ll think of something. Somehow…”

But Jon doubted that he would.

“I’m not Sam’s friend because I’m ignorant of his faults. I’d help you, too, Domeric Bolton—poisoned plants and all.” He smiled, voice dry. “I suppose you think me foolish.”

Silence. Dom contemplated him. Jon kept the earnest expression on his face.

Dom finally broke the quiet, and his question jarred Jon for the first time. “Would your betrothed not resent you for putting your House in such danger? Wasting all your efforts, all her efforts?”

Jon considered the question, blinking. He’d been thinking of Sam, of the logistics of this conversation, of the practicalities. Until that point, he’d never considered that Dany would be angry at his choice.

For an instance, his throat seized in panic.

And then the feeling dissipated. If in some alternate universe, Daenerys Targaryen was angered by his efforts, Jon would win her forgiveness. Obeyrn had taught him that lesson the first day they’d met.

But there was no need for that. In her first letter, Daenerys Targaryen had declared that Moat Cailin would be their home and their happiness. She’d challenged the king and informed Jon that he
sounded better with her name. Through countless other letters, she’d revealed herself to him as a person who cared for others—who wouldn’t back down to bullies. This was the girl who’d publicly apologized to his father. The girl who’d challenged a knight’s actions against a lowborn maid. The girl who’d been humiliated before the realms and yet declared it a victory.

“No,” Jon asserted, unwavering. “She wouldn’t.” It was the first time he’d spoken with complete certainty during this conversation.

He didn’t want to be the type of man who ignored the right thing in favour of the safe thing.

He rather thought she’d cheer him along, consequences be damned. The home of a bastard and a Targaryen would always have a tainted reputation. But if part of that came from his efforts to help someone, then he’d wear it proudly.

I’m doing the right thing, he thought, all uncertainty fading away.

“Regardless,” Dom finally said, straining. He’d obviously given up trying to sway him. His lips were pressed together in what Jon would call mounting impatience, in any other man. “I won’t collaborate with this poor plot.”

“As if you could make a better one!” Jon bit out, irritated. “It’s easy to pick apart something, but I’d bet you’d have no idea how to succeed!”

“Well, first of all, you’d have to ensure that Samwell didn’t…” Domeric trailed off. He stared at Jon, blinking slowly, thoughts spinning behind those pale eyes.

“‘First of all’ what?” Jon asked, leaning forward attentively.

“‘Poison and all’, wasn’t it?” Domeric mused, ignoring the question. Slowly, his mouth twisted into a smile. “Oh, I see. Clever, Jon; were the risks not so great you may even have succeeded.”

Jon, sensing his failure, quickly spoke. “You’ve identified all the holes in my plan in a matter of moments; with enough time, you could help me get Sam away, you’d lose nothing and would keep the strong ally you wanted. Think of it as a game, a way to show you can outsmart Randyll Tarly. He thinks you’re nothing but an idiot, but I think you could best him. A game; an exercise,” he repeated. “Your chance to outsmart a military genius.”

Jon held his gaze, gut churning.

Dom’s smile widened. “For your first attempt at manipulation, Jon Snow, it was adequate. First, you come to me with a plan you know is foolish, get me to outline why it is, protesting all the while. Then you try to trick me into helping you get what you want without having to offer anything in return. As you said, you know me, ‘poison and all.’ You tried to play on my desire for superiority.” He shook his head, smile fading to nothing. “I’m entertained Jon—if nothing else. The boy I met at those months ago wouldn’t even considered such a tactic.”

Jon sat down on his bed, leaning back on his arms. “Alright, a game, was it? There must be stakes, loss and wins. I’ll help you if you can offer me something of value.”

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Jon scowled at him, cursing them both. Couldn’t he just have one win? Jon felt like he’d done nothing but lose since they got to Horn Hill! He considered the offer; it was the very thing he’d been trying to avoid. He had very, very few cards in this relationship.
“What do you want?” Jon asked.

Dom shrugged. “What do you have?”

Other take him, he knew very well what Jon had!

“The moss? A special deal,” he tried.

Dom shook his head. “House Bolton doesn’t lack for wood; your father’s plans have only increased our surplus.”

He waited. Jon watched him for a moment, then trained his gaze away, getting nauseous. He knew what he could offer. He knew what Dom would accept.

_Do you really want to do this, Jon Snow? Give Sam coin and wash your hands of it. You’re not his keeper. If he wants it enough, he should escape alone. Is a person who can’t even fight for himself worth the risk?

Yes, Jon decided, thinking of Dany’s orphans, of the desperate people he’d convinced to head to the Moat. He would help Sam because people only needed help when they were unable to fight for themselves.

“Help me,” Jon said, reading his card, holding it close, examining it…and then playing it. “And I’ll help you win Robb’s friendship.”

Total stillness between them. Several heartbeats passed in stillness.

Then Dom smiled. “Is my acting so poor that you think I need aid?”

Jon exhaled through his nose. “If I told Robb all about you, what I’ve seen, he’d _never_ trust you.”

“No,” Jon snapped, teeth gritted. The idea that he’d betray Robb grated on all his sense. “I won’t tell him false. There are many sides to you, Domeric Bolton, and you could be a valuable ally.” He paused. “Or I could tell him that you’re a man with a thousand faces and none of them true.”

What Jon didn’t mention is that Robb was oddly stubborn about making his own judgments about people, even if Jon insisted certain men were untrustworthy. Take Theon, for example, whom Robb liked for some peculiar reason. Perhaps he pitied the hostage heir of the Iron Islands and thus ignored his malice. Perhaps he felt a kinship to Theon since they were both the heirs to Great Houses. Perhaps he saw something in the older boy that Jon didn’t.

Robb was optimistic about people, almost naively so: if he liked Domeric, he may trust him regardless of Jon’s counsel. The heir to Winterfell had even once excused stories of Roose Bolton’s cruelty, despite the turbulent history between their Houses, and the fact that the entire North was wary of the Leech Lord.

If Jon was honest, sometimes that straightforward, trusting side of his brother made him wary. What kind of lord Robb would be if he grew up with that too-honest worldview? Robb saw the ‘goodness’ in people just like Sansa believed in the inherent gallantry of knights: with an almost childlike faith. Robb was smart, of course, in many ways, but Jon didn’t think his brother understood _people_ and how vile they could be.

Of the vices that drove them.
But Domeric doesn't know any of this. Domeric had been sent away when Robb was very young, and the boys had no bond between them. Jon could use that fact in his favour.

“So, this is not so much a promise of friendship than it is a threat of distrust,” Dom murmured. “Very good, Jon.” Jon swallowed, his stomach churning unpleasantly. Truthfully, he hadn’t wanted to play this card for many reasons, and one of them was that he felt as if he were betraying Domeric by threatening to reveal his true nature. It seemed like a very underhanded method.

“Well? Are we in agreement?” he finally asked, ignoring the unease.

“Samwell Tarly in exchange for Robb Stark?” Dom mused. “Yes, I’ll help you.”

Jon resisted the urge to snap at him again—he wasn’t sacrificing Robb. “Your help with Sam in exchange for my help with Robb.”

“Of course,” Domeric smiled. “This has been entertaining, Jon Snow; seeing you use one’s weakness against them.”

Jon felt ill.

Later, after telling Sam the new plan, he lay in bed, thinking about what he’d promised. *Samwell Tarly in exchange for Robb Stark.*

In his mind, Domeric’s simple tone echoed and grew and contorted until it was a monstrous, sinister sound. The bloody history of Houses Stark and Bolton danced behind his lids. The fine hairs on his body raised.

Jon took a breath and squeezed his eyes shut, turning onto his belly and clutching the pillow tightly. *Samwell Tarly in exchange for Robb Stark.*

“That’s not what this is,” he whispered. “I’ll be there. I’ll be by Robb’s side.”

Jon wasn’t sacrificing anything; he was only giving Domeric a small opening, something the older boy would have gotten himself, with how charming he could be. And wasn’t this better? This way, he could control the situation, mediate the friendship. He knew so much about Domeric; he could use that knowledge to protect Robb.

“Plots and plans are useless if you can’t act on them.” The Starks were kings in the North in all but name. The Northern lords would follow no other, and Jon would be amongst them; House Stark’s most loyal bannerman.

Domeric had already shown an indication that he wasn’t completely obedient to his father. Jon would try to use that. To keep Domeric on their side.

And if, one day, Domeric choose to make himself their enemy…

There would always be a Stark in Winterfell. Eight thousand years hadn’t changed that, nor would eight thousand more. *Jon swore it.*

Hours later, having ensured that the gods were aware of his new oath—that he himself believed it—Jon Snow fell asleep. He dreamed of merry Maester Samwell lecturing a group of giggling children. A faceless woman with silver hair watched from the doorway, a contented smile painting her lips. A
tall, dark man stood at her side, Valyrian Steel hanging from his belt.

The air smelled of moss.

*****

There was a woman in his bed, although for the life of him, Robert Baratheon couldn’t remember when she’d arrive—or how long she’d been there. The golden coverlet concealed her almost entirely, but for a slim, swarthy arm.

Well, it didn’t matter in the end, did it? Her name, her voice, her thoughts—all irrelevant. She was a whore, and there was only one use for whores.

Robert pushed himself up, slowly, feeling the combined weight of his bones and his soul trying to drag him to the floor. His head was pounding faintly, his mouth was dry and bitter, and the world seemed to hold him down just a bit harder.

These were symptoms he’d long grown accustomed too: he was sobering up. Robert had decided years ago that sober was an unacceptable state, which was only good for bringing thoughts and memories he’d long swore to avoid.

—Loverly Lyanna, stolen from him, butchered, his future left in ashes.—

—Ned Stark, his brother, his friend, forgiving the Targaryens for their evil. A public slap in the face of Robert’s torment.—

—Bruises on that golden bitch; her tears, which she pressed into the pillow; a rightful punishment for having a crown that didn’t belong to her! Guilt the following morning, sickness, madness, and alcohol to wash it all away.—

—Stannis, his cold, cruel sibling who’d always judged him…gently fixing the clasp on the spawn’s cloak, then lifting the girl upon a white horse, taking more care with her than he ever showed to his own brother. Her smile, as if she deserved to feel a moment of joy after what her family had done!—

—Standing before Joffrey, his son, his blood, and feeling… Disgust. Disappointment. Dissociation. ‘Who is this boy? Not my son, surely?’ That same emptiness echoed with timid Tommen and dull Marcella. A punishment, they were; a punishment for his failure. The gods knew his children should have been of Stark blood.—

Sometimes, Robert wanted to take his horse and hammer and disappear. Maybe he’d join a mercenary company, become the Sellsword King. Wage war on the Free Cities and the Slave Cities, battle wild Dothraki screamers and immovable Unsullied soldiers, and then sail to the edges of the world in search of more. He’d fuck a woman from every nation along the way. Finally, he’d die a glorious death that would inspire a thousand songs to last a thousand years.

Or maybe his new life would be the complete opposite. He sometimes had those dreams, too, where he was no one. He’d buy some sheep and become a shepherd in some remote land that had never even heard of Westeros. A place that knew nothing of Stags or Wolves or Lions or Dragons. He could wed some merry peasant girl with a large smile and larger tits. Every year he’d fend off thieves and fight with nameless men against their nameless enemies. He’d raise his sons to do the same.

No matter the vein, the point was the same: he dreamed of a new life. A good life.

An impossible life.
He was King of Seven Kingdoms. First of his damned Name. Lord and Protector and so on and so forth of Andals, Rhoynar, and First Men. There were forty million squalling babes that worshipped his ugly throne.

He’d been put on that bloody chair for the good of the people—or so Jon always said. Because he was the hero of the Rebellion, the saviour of Westeros, the man who’d ended three hundred years of tyranny. And Robert may be a lot of things, but he was a king. He’d known what it meant to take the throne, to overthrow that mad despot. Responsibility. Years ago, he’d had idealistic views of remaking the seven kingdoms into a place where heroes rescued maidens from dragons and lived happily till their dying day.

But the reality of Westeros meant that the dragon killed the maiden long before the hero could rescue her.

And then there were the people he’d ‘freed.’ They were nothing more than a cesspit of schemes and corruption and greed, and Robert was useless in the wars of courts and lords. Now, he was just trying to hold onto the last shreds of his soul in the face of...everything. He was a king—a hero—a legend. He even sat on the throne, occasionally, contrary to what some seemed to think. Listened to squabbles and upheld the laws of the land.

*He’d show all the wraiths how he’d taken their chair and sat his Baratheon ass upon it. How all their power and beauty and magic was useless in the face of his hammer. And when the Stranger finally took him, he’d spit in their faces.*

But before then, the last spawn would witness it all. Through her freakish gaze, every dragon watched with tattered wings. He’d make sure she was miserable in this pit, seeing how his children were princes and princess and she was nothing.

*Are you watching, Rhaegar? You did this. Your lust did this!*

Miserable.

Miserable.

“I’m miserable,” he mouthed, not allowing the words to have the substance of sound. *I loved war and women. Both are gone. I have nothing.*

Yes, sobriety was unacceptable; thankfully, being a king enabled him to honour this one vow, at least. Have this one escape from a cemetery hopes: for brotherhood, for marriage, for happiness…all ashes on his tongue.

*Where’s my bloody wine!*  

“Mmm, your Grace,” an alluring female voice of mixed accent bid, sleep and satiation heavy in her tone. He turned in time to catch an alluring smile on plump lips. “Come back to bed, your Grace.” She rose slowly, allowing the covers to slip from her waif-like figure, slowly revealing an alluring body.

Ah, yes, he recalled. Drink wasn’t the only method of escape, nor the most *pleasant.* Whores and their one use; fucking the memories away. He normally preferred buxom whores, but now he remembered more of the previous day, hazy as the recollection was through the ever-present fog. He’d chosen her because she had a voice that gave a man *ideas.*

*Distractions.* Yes, she could distract him for a few more—
Her arms and hips were badly bruised. Her smile was weak at best—wary. She invited him with a voice full of desire and eyes full of concern.

His arousal ceased, leaving only a rancid taste on his tongue. Robert turned away, his breath rushing in with a gasp. Naked and unashamed, he took heavy, lurching steps towards his desk, noting the multiple empty pitchers of wine that littered the surface and floor around it. He searched for a full one, grabbing them up one by one before throwing them to the floor with a desperation borne of being trapped.

“Your Grace?” she questioned. He heard the bedding shift, and then the quiet sound of feet on stone as she approached. There was a hint of dread in the tone, making the concern tremble. She may as well have pierced him with a dagger. Her lovely voice was ruined by her fear of… him.

Robert threw his arm back, not looking her way. “Get out!” he ordered. “Out, damn you!”

She didn’t hesitate to take her clothes and scramble out the door. Her haste gave him further hint of her real sentiments, making him feel as if he shared her bruises somewhere far more permanent.

Robert was no fool, much as everyone loved to jeer. He knew that’s what they called him, the smiling liars and hypocrites! He saw much—he just didn’t want to. Willful ignorance had become his drug of choice.

He met his own gaze in the polished mirror that sat innocently upon his dresser. The man he saw was an alien. He was fat where he’d once been powerful. He was flushed and sweaty, with dark bags under his eyes, where he’d once been the picture of health. His greasy hair hung limp, and his unruly beard covered fleshy chins.

But beyond all that, beyond the physical changes…the man in the mirror was clutching an empty pitcher of wine like a lifeline.

With an enraged bellow, Robert rushed towards the mirror, wrenched the cretin off the table, and smashed it once, twice, trice against the wall until his fingers were bloody and the piece of traitorous metal was made useless.

Robert turned towards the window and threw the metal out as hard as he could. He was left there, panting, sick.

Sober.

Gods help him, his pitchers were all empty. He’d geld that useless Lannister squire for this.

He stumbled to the door, clumsy, and wrenched it open.

A Lannister stood outside alright, but the wrong one and armoured in white. Robert was jarred for a moment, forgetting his intent to call for wine. The lion hadn’t been at his door in the mornings for longer than he could remember.

The Kingslayer had been back barely a heartbeat before Cersei decided to strip the girl and parade her before the court, an event Robert had only heard about afterwards. He’d been incredulous; he knew the bitch was cold but he didn’t think her completely lacking wits. He still wondered what it had looked like, wondered how he’d have felt if he’d been holding court that day and seen it for himself. Would he have laughed, as those false rumours had said?

He didn’t want to know. Some illusions a man must keep. At least the bitch was gone, which he was grateful for. Many shared his sentiments, his Hand at the top. The man before him surely didn’t.
“Your grace,” Ser Jaime Lannister bowed, smirking.

“Kingslayer.”

Robert looked the man up and down. The rumours said he spent his mornings down in Flea Bottom’s taverns, up to his eyeballs up in piss flavoured ale and sleeping in gutters. Varys had confirmed these rumours months ago when Ser Preston Greenfield, one of the Kingsguard, had maliciously asked after Jaime’s whereabouts. Robert had laughed at the news.

The proud lions reduce to morgues and sewers.

Despite his new preoccupation with the city, the Kingslayer hadn’t tried to visit his sister in all these months—Robert had order Varys to keep watch just in case the man got some mad scheme of freeing her. Although, Ser Jaime wouldn’t have gotten far if he’d tried. No living man (not even the High Septon) was allowed in the Hall of the Stranger. The living quarters of the Silent Sisters, deep under the Great Sept, was heavily guarded. Any man who disturbed the Stranger’s wives was cursed to die a gruesome death—and those that allowed it were all doomed to the same fate.

The Stranger wasn’t a very forgiving God.

Ser Jaime didn’t look near death, but he did look different. He’d grown a short beard and his hair had grown past his shoulder. He kept it in a low pony’s tale, almost uncaring where before he’d preen like a peacock. The Kingslayer seemed leaner and there were bags under his eyes. Yet, for a person apparently drowning himself in ale, he stood strangely straight, almost proud.

But then, the Kingslayer, like his father and sister, had a way of standing that made it seem as if he were above the realms of men. It’s why men resented Jaime Lannister, oathbreaking aside, and why he was the last person Robert wanted to see.

“Your whore has fled, your grace. Shall I call for another? Perhaps an assortment?” There was nothing in his tone, but Robert heard the derision.

Robert stepped forward, uncaring of his nudity, and backhanded Jaime Lannister so hard his hand felt the imprint of teeth. The lion staggered for a moment, eyes widening. He quickly straightened himself, looking to the floor. Robert saw his jaw moving back and forth, testing the injury.

For a moment, Robert was stunned by his action. He’d never been one to outright strike a man for his tongue. It was the sobriety; had to be! He sounds so much like that bitch of a sister.

“Mind your tongue before your king!” Robert roared, channelling shock into anger.

“Your pardon, your grace,” the Kingslayer retuned, bowing low, voice tight.

Sometimes, Robert thought he should have shipped this man to the Wall. Let the lion strut amongst the criminals and traitors, let his balls freeze and his golden hair fall out. But he’d been pleased that Mad Areys was dead, and further that the wildfire plot had been stopped. Once upon a time, he’d have called this man a friend, in respect for his sword skill if nothing else. But that wasn’t why he’d pardoned him: they’d needed Tywin’s gold and his daughter’s hand to strengthen their hold on Westeros and isolate the Reach. Keeping Ser Jaime in white benefited them greatly and cost them little.

Or so Jon had argued.

And now, over a decade later, they kept him around because they needed a Lannister hostage in case that murderous old Lion got any ideas. The arrogant knight could smirk and mock all he wanted, but
the moment he tried to leave the city he’d be tussled up like a hog and delivered to Robert’s feet.

That knowledge made his smile something ugly. “Those whores kept me warm in between visits to your sister’s cold cunt, Kingslayer.”

Ser Jaime’s head rose; his lip was split and blood tricked at the corner of his mouth. He wiped it on his white glove, painting his hands the colour they really were. The loathing on his face made Robert want to hit him harder.

“If Lannister cousin of yours isn’t here with the wine in ten minutes I’ll have him flayed!” he thundered. He slammed the door in the cretin’s face.

Robert took heavy steps and sat slumped against his bed, blearily watching the windows and counting the seconds. He was sobering up, and the memories came. There was no tourney, no whore, no drink to distract him. Not even a group of snivelling courtiers to earn his scorn.

‘Your whore has fled.’ By all the gods, ‘Kingslayer’ was an apt moniker.

Once upon a time, whores had been loath to leave his presence. They’d adored him, more than just for his coin. They’d laugh with him when he jested, and he’d enjoyed that almost as much as fucking. Now they ran like rats, his marks upon them.

Men, too, had laughed with Robert. He’d been famed for his ability to turn enemy into friend, to settle disputes with his fists and then invite his opponent to a tavern. More oft than not, he’d have a new friend come morning. Robert had always been quick to fury, but even quicker to laugh and make amends. Growing up, he’d collected friends and lovers, making merry with a pleasure that drew others to him, made them envy his joy until they learned to share it. During the Rebellion, he’d turned many an enemy captive into a loyal follower.

Stannis had ridiculed him for it. But he’d shut up when those men soon marched amongst his army.

But now he was a king, and friendship was not for kings. All he had left were sycophants too terrified or too greedy to speak a word against him, and valiant swords that would sooner besmirch their honour than face him seriously in friendly sport.

It had been years since any man was honest with Robert Baratheon, First of his fucking Name.

Only Eddard Stark had been such man, true to king and bastard alike. He’d never hesitated to tell Robert his opinion, flattering or not. Ned never hesitated to speak against him and challenge his actions and decisions.

Robert had ruined all that, and his only friend had left to the farthest North, taking his dearly needed advice with him.

No other could restrain Robert Baratheon. So had it been since they were children.

One letter from him and I helped Jon and Stannis and Varys and who knows who else get rid of Cersei. The hold you have over me, Ned; if you were my advisor, the things we could do! Cleanse these courts, regain my joy… and maybe even become a good king, and not just one better than Mad Aerys.

When they’d met, Ned had been quiet. Sombre. Serious. Dutiful to a fault. He’d reminded Robert of Stannis at first, and the thought had soured his mood. But Eddard Stark was no Stannis Baratheon. For one, Ned was almost shy, while Stannis was joyless. For another, Robert had been able to draw Ned into mischief; to make him laugh until he choked; to prod him into looking towards a bright
future rather than preoccupy himself with his past mistakes. Robert had learned how to turn a serious lordling into an almost-carefree boy.

Yet still, even at his quietest, young Eddard never hesitated to contradict Robert; to confront his anger and impulsivity with frank honesty. Ned always spoke with a clear surety of what acts were good and right and honourable; three things Robert had never been entirely sure of. Ned spoke to Robert as if he were a person with the potential to be good.

He eventually learned that Ned had experience handling tempers much worse than his own.

“Brandon’s wild, Rob,” Ned, at eight, had shared. His tone was one of fond exasperation, long face set in the shadow of a smile. “You remind me of him, but he was…more.” The boys and a group of guards were riding west along the High Road, on their way to the crossroads. They’d passed the famed Bloody Gate hours ago. Ned would continue northward along the Kingsroad, while Robert would take a ship at Harroway Town. It was their first visit home since they’d been fostered with Lord Jon Arryn. Robert could have taken a faster route by going east, but he’d rather accompany Ned.

“You listen to me when I caution against some dangerous plan, but Bran? He’ll dive in head first, laughing all the while, and pulling us down with him. Sometimes I think he does it just to prove he can. I’ve got to watch him, or he’s likely to burn Winterfell to the ground.” Ned shook his head. “Father says Bran’s got more wolf’s blood than most; sometimes he jokes that Bran stole the bit of wildness meant for me.”

Quiet Ned rarely shared. They’d known each other for almost a year, and this was the first time he’d opened up about his family, besides superficial facts. Perhaps it was because they were parting; Robert knew he, for one, would miss his friend.

So, he decided to share too. Ned wasn’t the only one with difficult brothers…although Robert couldn’t say he echoed the warmth that softened Ned’s tone.

“I thought you were like Stannis,” Robert told him, and Ned grew quiet and attentive. “But you’re not, Ned. Not at all. Stannis is…he’s like…like—” Robert looked around, searching for the words. “Gods, Ned! Like these mountains! Cold, unyielding, rigid. He stays all alone in the castle, reading this or that; he never moves, never laughs. He hates everything I like and always looks at me like-like I should be better. He’s so serious and he’s always telling me what I ought to be doing, and he thinks he’s smarter than me just because I don’t like sitting still at lessons.” Robert twisted his face in anger. “Maester Cressen never stops praising Stannis!”

He broke off, looking forward and away from Ned’s solemn gaze. For many moments the only sounds were of the horses and murmurs of the guards.

“No matter how I try, I can’t get him to laugh. I don’t think he knows how.” Silent again, quiet and almost mournful. “You’re not like him, Ned,” Robert finally said. “I wish you were my brother.”

When, at sixteen, he and Stannis had watched as their parent’s ship was swallowed by the sea, and Robert was left with a title he wasn’t ready for, the fourteen-year-old Stannis didn’t allow him even a moment of respite before assaulting him with plans and responsibilities and duties. He didn’t care for Robert’s sorrow, for Renly’s tears. He ignored any attempt to speak of the loss.

And yet the only thing that survived the storm was Patchface, a witless fool that had been his father’s present to Stannis. There was nothing left for Robert.

Within days of the funeral, Stannis was right back to doing what he’d always done. Plans and duties
and management. Ignoring Renly and pressuring Robert to be more. “Father is gone, Robert; It's time to stop wasting time at the Eyrie with Eddard Stark. Lord Arryn will understand—you're Lord of Storm’s End now; you have a duty to your people.”

His brother felt nothing when their parent died. He’d treated the event like some blasted inconvenience!

Stannis is unfeeling to his core.

But Ned…Ned was there for him. Spiteful and desperate for an understanding face, he’d ignored Stannis and set out for the Vale that very day. With Ned standing vigil, Robert had finally mourned his loss.

Ned cared for his sorrow, cared for Robert…while Stannis never had.

That day he’d vowed that his brother-by-choice would become his brother in truth. Ned had a sister, and Robert would marry her. Sweet, lovely Lyanna Stark would be his perfect bride. He’d convince Ned to move to the Stormlands, which his Lyanna would no doubt appreciate, and he’d give him a title and rich lands and betroth him to one of his bannermen’s daughters. Whichever woman he fancied, Ned would get. Ned would be his advisor, and their children would grow up side by side. They’d have Ned’s honesty and Robert’s vivacity. A perfect family; strapping boys to make him proud and beautiful daughters to ease his soul.

Lord Rickard accepted his suit. A year later, he met Lyanna Stark and they fell in love. It was a union blessed by men and gods.

But dragons answer to neither.

Rhaegar Targaryen had ridden his shining steed, crowned Robert’s bride in a display of breathtaking conceit, and stolen his future. With one act, Robert’s dreams were ash.

That’s when the madness had sprouted.

When Lyanna was taken, his soul called for war, for revenge. That madness rejoiced to see a black-helmed demon’s chest collapse, armour dented from Robert’s great hammer. The madness was pleased to see the demon’s two spawn wrapped in Lannister red. It was enthused by the prospect of ridding the realms of his thrice-damned siblings! The Targaryens had taken everything from him and it was only natural that they pay him back in blood.

But Honorable Eddard Stark had called it murder and taken his leave of the capital that very day.

Ned didn’t understand the idyllic future that had been stolen from them.

He blamed Robert for refusing to hold Tywin Lannister accountable, not understanding that the realm was bleeding and now was the time for stability.

Damn you, Ned! Think of your father, your brother, your sister. It was justice!

But Ned didn’t understand, not at all. Ned thought Robert was a villain. He thought that pardoning Tywin meant Robert would have ordered deaths himself. He proved it the day Stannis had brought Daenerys Targaryen to court.

His brother by choice had look at him…as if he truly believed Robert would order the murder of a babe. His brother-by-choice looked at him as if Robert were no longer the boy he’d grown up with! After everything he’d done for Ned, after everything he’d planned for them! This war he’d waged
was to salvage the future he’d been promised. He’d been prepared to make Lyanna his wife, to make her his queen. Even if that spawn had dishonoured her.

Yet Ned Stark thought he’d ordered the death of a child before all the realms. It had never even crossed my mind. Daenerys Targaryen was female; it was Viserys who concerned him, and mildly at that. He’d planned to make her his ward and raise her under his careful eye, ensuring she’d learn her place and would never try to marry some man with dangerous aspiration. If someone else harmed her…well, Robert could understand why the realm would hate her. When she grew, he’d vaguely thought, he’d marry her to a loyal vassal—she’d be nice to look at, if nothing else—or give her to the Seven.

But suddenly, Stannis, who’d never cared for anything in his life, had stepped forward to question his king. All the gods knew it was Stannis that lacked sentiment, and yet he’d dared insinuate that Robert was the monster between them. His cold, unfeeling brother—who didn’t even mourn his own parents—dared claim the moral high ground and tried to shame Robert and besmirch his character. Looking down on him, as he’d done their whole lives. How dare he. Robert was a hero. It was Tywin Lannister’s men that had killed those children, not he! He hadn’t ordered it!

So what if I felt their deaths were just? So what if it had felt like the gods’ reward? It’s not like their blood was on my hands.

And yet, Ned Stark had followed Stannis, of all men, and looked at Robert—his friend, his brother—as if he were a villain.

It had enraged him beyond measure, and in an act he regretted to this day, he’d irreparably torn the fragile bond between them—one only recently healed over Lyanna’s bones. He’d forced the dragonspawn onto Ned’s bastard in the single stupidest move he’d ever made.

A mere quarter hours later, his rage cooled, he’d wished upon gods old and new to reverse time. Anything to prevent it…because he couldn’t take it back.

Robert was king. He couldn’t recant the degree without being seen as fickle. His reign was new; he needed to come across as confident, powerful, decisive.

Or so Jon Arryn counselled.

Had it been the current Robert, instead of that idealistic fool he’d been, he’d have ignored the counsel and broken the betrothal at once. Fuck the court, fools and sycophants all, Ned Stark was worth more than the lot of them combined. If anyone dared protest, they could meet him on the field!

His hammer was anxious for a war.

But by the time he’d realized it, years had passed, a castle was underway, and the Northerners had embraced the betrothal as a way to keep that bloody Pact of theirs. Yes, she was primarily a tool by which they washed hands of Targaryens…but she would also be a lady of the North. Ned’s bastard or not, she was one of them now, those strange people and their strange sense of honour. If Robert tried to break it now, he’d only increase the North’s ire, and he’d already slighted them enough. They’d helped him take the throne, and he had rewarded them with a spawn.

He had expected them to accept her. He hadn’t thought they’d embrace her!

He’d been enraged at the news that Ned forgot her thrice damned blood. But he’d also almost expected it; it was Eddard Stark’s way. That day, he’d loved his brother for the same reasons he’d hated him.
That forgiveness had been a stab to the chest. But Robert could have weathered it…had Ned not sailed back North without one word to him, without even a pretence of visiting. He’d been a mere half day’s trip away.

He’d felt as if Ned had officially severed the bond between them, severed their past and dismissed Robert’s hatred. Made him feel like a child for harbouring it, he who’d only lost a betrothed while Ned had lost his father and brother and sister.

Ned had made him feel so angry and at the same time so…envious. He hated the Targaryens so much, so deeply it was a madness within him—a poison. He despised them all regardless of age or gender or fault. In his dreams, he killed Rhaegar over and over and over.

He couldn’t stop the loathing, didn’t know if he wanted to, and yet Ned could and did. Ned always knew what was good and right and honourable; three things Robert still hadn’t learned, even decades later. Three things he secretly feared he’d gotten worse at recognizing. Or gotten good at ignoring.

Robert Baratheon responded to hurt and shame and sorrow with rage.

He’d gathered a huge entourage and ventured into the godswood, hunting animal after animal for days, not resting until his body sagged in the saddle, his head swam from drink, and exhaustion pulled him down, down, down.

It wasn’t enough, and somehow the madness had driven him to Cersei’s bed, a place he’d always avoided like a plague. It was always she that came to him when she believed it was time for another child. Always with a haughty sneer, laying still beneath him as if he were a rutting pig and she a virgin sacrifice.

Cersei became the target of his anger because hating her was easy. She had no place being his wife. On her, when he saw the bruises in the morning, he could excuse them. He was a king that lay with his queen; that was only proper. Tywin married her to me. He caused all this. Had it been Lyanna, I’d have loved her and never harmed one hair.

Ned would have still been by his side, his friend, rather than just an almost-stranger who wrote the occasional letter, after Robert had forsaken his queen. But the words Ned wrote were awkward, stilted—and Robert had never been good at putting things down on paper. They were a useless tool anyway--letters; ten minutes in person trumped ten thousand written words.

“Your grace,” a quiet voice, familiar. He looked up, and there was Jon Arryn. He hadn’t heard the Hand come in. He spied the blasted Lannister squire behind him, clutching a pitcher of wine; Lancel, wasn’t it? Bloody big family, like flies at court. Who had time to name them all? They were weakened now, he assumed; their influence lessened and not filling the cracks and positions as they had when Cersei was queen. Still, they were a plague on him.

“Get out,” he snapped. Lancel flinched, wide eyes and golden haired.

He made a quick bow, “Yes, your grace!”

“Leave the wine, you yellow haired shit!”

Lancel made a detour and left the pitcher on the table amongst the others. Then he turned tail and fled.

Jon came towards him with a dressing robe. Obediently, Robert shrugged on the velvet robe. Queerly, he sometimes missed his armour; the dirt and grime that infested it after a battle, the blood.
Robert felt too *clean* these days, and surely a real man should not be so pristine.

“There’s no reason to be cruel to them, Robert,” Jon chided, reminding him of being a boy and learning at Jon Arryn’s knee. “Your squires are barely a decade into their lives.”

Robert stood and poured himself a large goblet, which he proceeded to drain in a few large swallows. Some Dornish red. “I thought I’d be done with Lannisters, yet they keep sprouting like weeds.”

“We’ve pushed Lord Tywin was far as we dare,” was Jon’s only response.

Robert chuckled at that. “I’d say most want to push his pompous ass right off of the Rock and see him crash onto the rocks below. He shits gold, they say; mayhap it also runs in his blood!”

“Robert,” Jon chided, mild.

Robert scowled. Jon Arryn had no humour in those creaky bones of his!

“Your grace,” Jon began, almost beseeching. Immediately, the king grew suspicious; the use of his title in private meant this was business. And the tone Jon used always meant there was something the Hand thought the king should be doing that he’d most definitely did not *want* to do.

“Spit it out, my Lord Hand,” he muttered, filling the goblet again. His hand shook, making the task more difficult. A few more goblets should fix that, he thought as he gulped down the wine, numb to its flavour.

“Your grace, the crown prince—”

“Damn you, Jon, not this again! You got the boy away from that she-demon. I’ve told you time and again that I’ve no interest. He’s your headache now.”

“Robert,” Jon scolded, harder. “The boy idolizes you. He knows the Rebellion by heart; your every victory is embedded into his young mind. You must—”

“Watch yourself, Hand,” Robert warned. “I love you as a second father, but no man tells the king what he *must* do.”

A brief silence. Robert filled the cup, not looking back at Jon.

“I beg Your Grace’s pardon,” the Hand finally said, mildly. Jon was never *angry*; pragmatic to his core. A born politician. As Hand of the King, he’d extinguished hundreds of fires in these ten years. His instinct was always to placate and mediate.

Sending Cersei to the Sisters was the boldest move Jon had made since Rebellion against the crown.

When Stannis had first come to Robert with the proposition, he’d dismissed it outright. But his brother was fixated on the Silent Sister and wouldn’t budge—still a mountain, still unbendable. Stannis would sooner starve than submit, which is why he’d been able to hold out against the Tyrell siege and prevent Mace from marching North. It was why Robert had given him Dragonstone after the war. He’d planned to do it even before that farce with the dragonspawn. He’d needed a hard man to hold the crownlands, and Stannis would never betray Robert. Plus, Robert knew Stannis had no love for Storm’s End or anything else—he only held because he’d been ordered to.

Robert had never expected Jon to actually agree to the punishment!
Even Robert knew such a punishment would only enrage Tywin Lannister, and the realm would see it as too harsh for a woman who’d birthed the royal children. He knew Jon wanted Joffrey under his control, and that Cersei had stood in his way for years, but—at most—he’d expected Jon to send her back to the Rock.

“What of your fear of the old Lion, Jon?” Robert asked, stunned at Jon’s agreement. “You wed me to that woman for the good of the realm, and now you’d fracture it over a bit of humiliation? For a Targaryen?! Your age has addled your mind, Jon. Just send Cersei to the Rock and be done with it.”

“I wed you to Cersei Lannister for heirs, Robert,” Jon began, not commenting on the King’s summation of the event. “Ser Jaime is a Kingsguard and has thus renounced his claim to the Rock. The second son, Tyrion, is a dwarf. I know lord Tywin’s pride well enough to know he would never allow the boy to succeed him.”

Robert remembered Tyrion Lannister from his wedding; a vile, ugly little creature. Tywin’s face had been granite in his son’s company. Everyone had stared and whispered and giggled when they’d passed, gossiping over this oft spoken of, but rarely seen, son of Tywin Lannister. Robert himself had gawked with interest, entertained by the boy’s awkward walk, twisted arms, and stubby legs. Cersei had sneered at her younger brother, naming him a hateful little monster. Tyrion’s freakish two-coloured eyes and flat pig-like nose had made him look it.

Tyrion had been barely twelve at that wedding, yet he’d drank nearly more than Robert.

No, Robert couldn’t see anyone letting him become the Lord of Casterly Rock. Were kinslaying not the gravest sin, and Tywin not deeply enamoured with all things Lannister, Robert rather thought the boy would have been killed at birth.

“Nor would he allow a Lannister cousin to inherit: He’d want the successor to be of his direct line,” Jon continued. “If we threaten annulment, making the children bastards, he’d not dare to act because he knows we have that heir in our hands. Prince Tommen has the greatest claim over Casterly Rock. He’d have to renounce his claim to the throne and to Storm’s End, of course. There was a precedent of a daughter’s son succeeding his grandfather, which Tywin well knows. If all goes accordingly, the Rock would be tied to the crown.”

Robert laughed in a great, delighted boom. “Ah, Jon!”

But Jon didn’t laugh with him; instead, he frowned with obvious disquiet. “I cannot allow the children to be spoiled, Robert. These years watching Joffrey grow has shown me how Cersei’s coddling poisoned the prince. We must separate them from her, mould them. Tywin Lannister does not scare me nearly so much in the face of this goal.”

Despite these promises, Robert was still hesitant. The famous song, The Rains of Castamere, played through his thought. “And Stannis won’t bend? No of course not, no need to answer. Fine Jon, I’ll think on it.”

“At least tell me why you don’t wish to see him, Robert.” Jon sighed, weary. Robert allowed his recollection to dissipate. “Even for an afternoon. For a single lesson. War strategy, Robert: you always enjoyed those. He is your son in that regard and has an eye for tactics.”

Robert snorted, finally turning to meet Jon’s gaze. “My son, you say, and yet I don’t see anything of myself in the boy. Call him Cersei’s and be done with it.”

He’d always been Cersei’s son, but there was also something more to Joffrey. Something Robert had
not seen even in his treacherous mother.

He’d been entering the keep, laughing with men and knights and friends. He’d been king for nearly five years now, and hunting still got his blood hot! Now he needed a woman to complete this most perfect of days.

Then he’d heard the laughter of children. Dismounting, he saw Joffrey and a group of boys, many yellow of hair, gathered at the edge of the inner bailey. The castle was loud and facing the wall as they were, the boys hadn’t seen his party return. A quick glance around and he saw that Cersei was nowhere to be seen; a rarity where the crown prince was concerned. That woman had her claws so deeply embedded in the boy Robert oft wondered if one day he’d find her fused to him.

It was about time he changed that, Robert decided. The boy was three now. It was time Robert took him underhand and made a man of him. It wouldn’t do for him to have a mollycoddled heir still sucking on his mother’s teat.

So, Robert and his companions made their way to the boys. At that moment, Joffrey raised his hand high, and Robert saw a rock clutched in his fist. He brought the stone down. Robert was too far away to see what he’d struck, but he heard Joffrey’s delighted giggle. Was this some new childhood game with rocks and sticks?

But while a few of the boys echoed the laugh, many seemed ill. A few others looked on the verge of tears. Confusion drew Robert’s brow together.

“Joffrey!” he bellowed, and the group looked up. The prince’s face lit up and he ran to his father. Robert swung him up high, scanning him. Robert was always looking for some small sign of himself in the boy; even a sigh of Stannis would do. But Joffrey was green and gold.

“Father!” the boy cheered, beaming. “Did you kill something, father?”

Robert grinned. “A boar almost bigger than me, my boy! I’ll take you hunting when you’re grown; teach you how to shoot a crossbow!”

Joffrey was all but bouncing in his arms. Then he thrust his small fist under Robert’s nose, and the king recoiled when he saw the rock. It was dripping blood. “I killed something too!”

Robert’s smile slipped. Around him, his men gave each other queer glances, silent signals of apprehension. Joffrey squirmed out of his arms and grabbed Robert’s hand. His son’s fingers were slippery.

Robert let himself be pulled towards the circle of boys, who gave them wide breadth. He spied a shaggy grey pup, so tiny it was likely fresh from the kennels. It lay on its stomach, motionless. When Robert finally comprehended why his stomach lurched in pure horror.

Its limbs had been crushed, one by one.

Torture.

The strike Robert had witnessed had killed it; a blow to the head that had crushed its skull. The neck hung at a queer angle, almost as if its head had been severed.

“It was the runt of the litter,” Joffrey chattered, smiling down at the carnage. Most of the other boys, all older than Joffrey, kept their heads to the ground; they all knew they’d done something wrong. None of them had blood on their hands; Joffrey had done this alone. His hunting companions stared at the prince with something like horror. When they noted Robert’s attention, they quickly schooled
their features and placed hesitant smiles upon their lips.

Robert felt strange; lightheaded and nauseous.

“The kennel master said it was useless.” His...son...continued. “So, it’s better off dead. Look, father! I’m a killer, just like you!”

He shoved Joffrey away and strode off, feeling dozens of eyes upon him. He got so drunk that night that he didn’t wake up the next day.

That was the last time he picked up his son.

“He’s a...challenging boy at times,” Jon allowed. Robert startled, realizing he’d been staring at the wall for many moments. “But I know he’ll soon mature and grow past this childish...belligerence.”

‘Belligerence’? Robert snorted, humourless. Jon didn’t understand; Cersei may have spoiled and coddled the boy, but there was something about Joffrey that was...wrong. Something not caused by her influence.

He drained his wine again. Finally, he was starting to feel the buzz as the fog reclaimed his memories. Jon continued, “But if you’d but pay him a little attention, I know he wouldn’t act out as he does. He did just lose his mother, Robert. He needs his father.”

I have a secret, Jon. I think my son is a monster. I have nightmares of Joffrey giggling as he orders men and women crushed by rocks. Of Cersei standing behind him and whispering the fate of Westeros in his ear.

How can he be mine?

Gods, how had this happened to him? Why had he been so cursed? Had he truly been such a vile man as to deserve a son like that? A life like this?

“Look, father! I’m a killer, just like you!”

Robert shuddered so hard the wine shook, splashing over the rim and wetting his hand. He drained what was left, drying his fingers on the robe: staining the Baratheon green. In this early light, it almost looked like blood. Robert went to fill the goblet again, only to realize the pitcher was empty.

“Bloody useless squires!” Robert snapped. “Help me dress, Jon; a king can’t get a decent bit of wine in this accursed place without having to fetch it himself!”

“You’ve had plenty, Robert,” Jon snapped. He sounded as close to losing his temper as possible. “You have a responsibility to your son! He needs someone to show him how to be a man, how to be a king.”

There may have been desperation in Jon’s voice. Robert ignored it.

“Between the two of us, Jon,” he began, looking up. For once, his voice was quiet, serious. “You’re the one that knows what it means to sit on that bloody throne. If you can’t teach him to be a king, then I certainly can’t.”

“You’re his father, Robert,” Jon tried one last time. The desperation was clear. “He’d listen to you, obey you. He looks up to you.”

“Enough!” Robert finally roared, temper snapping. “I’ve made myself clear, Hand!”
In the following quiet, Jon Arryn seemed to sag, one body part at a time. Legs. Arms. Head. His shoulders fell last. At that moment, Jon looked decades older than he was.

Defeated.

But Robert was nearly drunk, so he didn’t much care.

“It has been a year since the former queen joined the Seven, Your grace.” Jon finally said, changing tactics. “Perhaps it’s time to think of marriage,” Jon said, silent. “A wife could—”

“No. Cersei was my first and last. I’ve begotten the required heir and spare, and even a princess if all else goes to shit. Betroth one of them, if you need an alliance.” Robert strode to the door. This time he ignored Jaime Lannister’s sullen figure and flagged down a passing servant.

“More wine! And summon my valet! And tell the stables and kennels that the King is going hunting.” He decided on a whim. “Spread the word to whatever opportunistic shit is looming.” He hesitated. “Tell Renly to ready his horse. Off with you now!”

He shut the door as the boy sprinted away. Had it not been so early, there would have been plenty of courtiers handing outside his door, waiting on the king to awake and take his morning shit, ready with whatever new schemes they thought would gain his favour. But he was rarely up so early and the parasites were either abed or had attached themselves to some other lord. Perhaps in their beds. He snickered to think of them all jumping around as they scrambled to don their breeches and not miss this chance to go hunting with the king.

He’d make a sport out of choosing some random companions for the hunt, watch them all trip over themselves. That would occupy his day and distract him in case the wine proved inadequate.

No more talk of sons and wives and whores.

“I don’t understand, Robert,” Jon said. The king glanced back to see that his Hand had collapsed onto a chair, elbows on the Dornish-glass table and forehead resting on his clasped fingers. He almost looked as if he were in prayer. “I remember you at the Eyrie, with that bastard of yours. Mia? Mara?”

“Mya,” Robert said, frowning. “Mya Stone.” Gods, he hadn’t thought of her in…years. Not since he’d once brought her up to Cersei and the bitch had threatened the girl’s life. He’d stuck her for it, and she’d carried the mark on her face for days, hidden under powder. That had been a few months after Joffrey’s incident with a pregnant tabby cat, Robert recalled. The boy had eviscerated it and brought him a bloody, unborn kitten. Robert had stuck him so hard he fell unconscious, right there in the throne room. He’d been unable to look at his son without feeling nauseous and had become melancholy to feel so separate from him. He’d thought a child would lift his spirits, and only Mya Stone had done that for him.

The Greyjoy Rebellion happened a month later, and the vigour of war had wiped the girl from his mind.

“Yes,” Jon murmured. “She was your first natural born child. Her mother was a chambermaid, wasn’t she?”

Robert tried to recall, but for the life of him the woman’s face, voice, and profession eluded him. A maid was likely, however. Some lowborn chit who’d been only too happy to fall into bed with a lord. He’d grown tired of her long before she’d given birth.

“Everyday you would visit the infant, often with Ned at your side.” Jon continued, nostalgia tinging
his voice. “You had such a bond with that girl; one time you even brought her to me and bragged that she looked just like you; a handsome girl with your Baratheon features.”

What an insolent move that had been, Robert smirked; bringing his bastard before the lord of House Arryn. He’d visited her alone that day, so Ned hadn’t been there to stop him. Jon had been so nonplused; even offended, he thought. It made him chuckle to this day.

More images pierced through the haze; pleasant ones, for once. A tiny girl with sea-blue eyes and coal black curls. She would run to him when he visited her, stretching up on her toes and staring up at him with fascination. He’d been tall even as a boy of eighteen; she’d not even reached his knee. He would scoop her up and toss her into the air, indulging the happy squeals she made when he threw her up higher and higher. She’d loved the heights, that girl. She’d been born for the Eyrie. Once, a mere month before Lyanna disappeared, he’d even snuck Mya into the High Hall at dawn, with Ned as his faithful yet disapproving companion, and shown her the view from the Moon Gate. She’d not felt a moment of fear as he held her suspended over the vast pit, only delighting at seeing the land below. Jon had found out about it, he recalled; the Moon Door was no toy, and he’d punished Robert and Ned harshly for opening it.

But he’d felt no regret. That girl was brave, and he’d only felt pride.

“What changed, Robert?” Jon asked. “Joffrey is your trueborn son, and yet he gets none of the attention you showered upon that girl. And perhaps it is his character that repels you, but then what of lovely Myrcella or shy Tommen? Could you not find that joy with them?”

“Send for her,” Robert ordered, abruptly. He ignored everything else, grasping onto those fond memories of a time before everything had gone to shit. Cersei was gone. No other would dare to harm the girl.

Jon was right in a sense; he didn’t feel a kinship to these golden children of his, but he had felt one for that small brave girl. Even Ned had once remarked that he was “surprised Robert was so smitten with the girl”. He missed that; he missed those uncomplicated days at the Eyrie.

“What?” Jon said, aghast.

“You heard me, Jon,” Robert groused. “Send for Mya Stone.”

A timid knock on the door. He bid the valet entry.

“Your Grace,” Jon protested. “Think on this more carefully. The court is no place for your…for that girl. The city is dangerous.”

Robert sent him a dismissive wave. “Who would dare harm a member of the castle, Jon? Just do it. Who knows, maybe she’ll rekindle my interest in…our conversation,” he said vaguely, aware of prying ears.

Jon was quiet after that. Robert was distantly aware that the Hand eventually agreed, probably disapproving. He didn’t much care; his head was too full of pleasant memories.

*****

The day after the failed exhibition—if one could even call it that, since it hadn’t even begun before Lord Tarly walked away—Horn Hill bore witness to a massive fight between their rejected heir, Samwell Tarly, and the bastard squire, Jon Snow.

Well, ‘fight’ was perhaps too generous a label, since Samwell never fought back. Instead, the bastard
assaulted him with harsh, cold, cruel words. Jeers and mocks and scorn. Pure poison passed through the boy’s lips. The heir stood there, snivelling and crying and not once defending himself. After an eternity, during which half of the castle had gathered to watch, Jon Snow finally threw down his sword, shoved Samwell to the hard courtyard flood, and proclaimed himself, “Done! Other’s take you, I’m done wasting my time!”

The bastard had then stormed off, his young face twisted in unholy rage, shoving past the crowd of avid watchers. He’d spent the remainder of the day viciously assaulting Lord Tarly’s stuffed practice dummies. He’d remained there well past nightfall, and the sound of his blows had kept the barracks awake. A guard finally had to order the boy to leave. He’d only returned a few short hours later at dawn. For three days straight, they were plagued with the rhythmic thump thump thump.

As for Samwell, he’d snivelled on the courtyard floor until his mother and sisters had come running. He’d hugged them all tightly, sobbing and clutching them all, one by one, as if he couldn’t bear to part. Soon after he’d run to his rooms, sobbing so loudly the walls rang from it: he sounded as if his heart were broken. He’d barricaded himself in his room, shouting at anyone who tried to enter. Not even his mother and sisters were allowed; their entreaties just went silently ignored.

Samwell refused every meal.

The servants shook their heads in pity; the boy had always treated them well enough. Still, his father had dismissed him; they figured that it was understandable that the bastard gave up on his efforts as well. Frankly, not too many of them were particularly shocked by the squire’s cruelty: it was only as they’d expected of a natural born son. The Faith warned of their evil souls.

“He was only trying to get close to the heir to Horn Hill.”

“For that moss of his; probably to trick future lord Samwell into paying high prices.”

“So that’s how it was!”

“That makes more sense.”

“Really, who would ever seriously befriend that Samwell? The boy’s a craven!”

“He is a bastard. What do you expect? Liars and traitor, the lot of ‘em.”

Many recalled the event months prior, so similar to this one: there was a precedent for the behaviour, so most accepted a repetition without question.

“How did Lord Randyll respond?”

“He denied the bastard food for three days, same as last time.”

“That’s it? Any other lord would have ordered the bastard flayed!”

“Keep up, ya fools; milord don’t care what happens to that boy o’ his; he’d done worse ‘imself. Way I see it, he’s probably mad as a grizzly that lord Sammy didn’t put the bastard in his place.”

“And… it’s not like anyone of us is gonna talk about this with strangers.”

“Now you’re getting it! Word won’t get out to no other highborn, so it don’t matter to him.”

During these turbulent, rumour full days, most of them ignored the coming and going of Domeric Bolton. He was a quiet, sort of dim lad. Since he’d ridden daily for months, they didn’t make
anything of it. He even went down to the village once, accompanied by his normal group: the master-at-arms’ son, the kennel master’s son, and the steward’s nephew.

Besides Sam’s refusal to emerge and Jon Snow’s near constant time in the training yard, the castle returned to their normal routine.

It was on the fourth day, worried about her son’s continued silence, that the Lady Melessa finally ordered his door broken down. A strong man took an axe to the wood, panting and chopping for nearly an hour before he broke through.

They shouldn’t have bothered.

Samwell Tarly was gone.

*****

After nearly two weeks of searching, Lord Randyll had been unable to find his runaway heir. The stable boy had seen Sam take a horse and leave early in the morning, three days after the fight, but hadn’t thought much of it until Lady Melessa hysterically ordered the guards to find her son. They’d searched the village, but besides a missing homeless person or two—something common enough in such a densely populated area—no one had seen Sam. Enraged, Lord Tarly had sent riders north and south along the kingsroad. They’d galloped for three days, searching the woods and the villages—of which there were plenty and all gathered around the Kingsroad—but no one had seen a boy pass through. Only a caravan consisting of gown men and women. Then Randyll had ordered the woods searched, in case Samwell was hiding. The search had been going on three days, and hunting dogs had been deployed, but they’d found nothing. Finally, Randyll thought Sam was hidden in the castle and had searched every room.

Again, nothing.

Wherever Sam had gone, he’d covered his tracks well.

“It’s like the boy disappeared into thin air!”

“We thank you for your hospitality, my lord,” Domeric demurred, smiling an open, vague smile. It was just after dinner, and Dom and Jon had begged an audience with Lord Randyll. “But as you see, Prince Doran has summoned us to Dorne. Alas, there is no way to contact prince Oberyn, so we’ll have to make the journey alone. If it pleases my lord, we shall depart at dawn!”

Randyll scanned the document with a slight displeased curl to his lips.

To get that piece of paper, Jon Snow had sacrificed Starfall. Ashara Dayne. The single greatest question in his young life could be answered at Starfall, and he’d given it up. For three days after the fight, he’d abused stuffed dummies in the training yard, mourning his choice.

Questioning his relief.

The closer he got to House Dayne, the harder it was to breathe. His whole history may haunt those halls. A story that may only make him regret going south. A woman that killed herself rather than be his mother.

The truth was terrifying. The truth could change everything.

Another time, he’d promised, another day.
Jon had written to Doran Martell the night before he and Samwell staged their fight. He’d told the man the truth: that events at Horn Hill had made their stay tense. He wrote of how he didn’t want to bring shame to Houses Stark and Martell and begged Doran’s leave to travel the rest of the way alone. Jon may have also subtly indicated that his lord father was extremely displeased by Oberyn’s negligence, and mayhap was planning to call Jon and Domeric home.

They weren’t being fostered with Lord Tarly; while short, bi-weekly stays at this or that house were acceptable—although even that his father had previously expressed disapproval—a four-month imposition was rude. Of course, Lord Stark didn’t actually know about their prolonged stay, since Jon usually only sent him a report every three months, but it was likely he’d have been displeased.

As Domeric had anticipated, Doran’s response had arrived twelve days later with orders that the boys take a ship at the port near Highgarden (three days’ ride north-west, if they didn’t rest) and sail to Sunspear. Naturally, they planned to take a merchant ship, which would stop at Old Town to sell their goods. Merchant ships in the Reach were also usually accompanied by a couple warships to discourage pirates, which often sought to prey upon vessels leaving Old Town. Then it would head directly to Sunspear.

Another time, another day.

All they had to do was sneak Sam out of the castle. He was hidden in the Maester’s chamber; years ago Sam learned of a small loft in the tower that stored hundreds of years of old books, reports, and knickknacks. A storm one night, a forgotten window latch, and a collation of foreign papers Sam had found while helping clean up had led to the discovery. The wooden ladder had long rotted away, and since the current maester had no use of the place, no one had gone up there in years. When the guards had done their initial sweep of the castle, they’d spent barely a moment in the tower before continuing on.

Every night Jon and Dom saved a portion of their meal and every morning before lessons they’d find an excuse to toss the sack of food and wine to Sam. Once, he thought the maester had seen them when he’d entered. Both Boys had frozen when the man’s eyes trailed up to the loft, lingered for a moment, and then started the lesson like normal.

Tonight, after Lord Randyll gave them leave to go, they’d retrieve Sam, sneak out of the castle and hide him in a large rock formation in the woods, which Domeric had found from his many rides in the woods, and then pick him up the following morning.

“Very well,” Randyll replied, putting the paper down. Jon’s breath caught; they were so close! He felt extremely smug just then; they’d outsmarted the only man to defeat the king in battle.

And then Randyll said, “I’ll send a group of men to accompany you. They’ll meet you at the gate at dawn.”

Domeric stilled. His vague smile never slipped, but now it was pasted on. Jon felt his stomach drop and the blood drain from his face.

Others take me. All their plots and schemes and they’d forgotten one crucial fact: they were young boys. Young heirs. They’d expected the public fight with Sam to alleviate Randyll’s suspicions, so he’d let them go unquestioned. They’d forgotten to account for Randyll Tarly’s personality.

And this, Jon reflected, is the limit to Domeric Bolton’s cleverness: He expected his own plans to go exactly as envisioned. To follow a preconceived path.
But Cyvasse had a set of rules. People did not.

Jon wasn’t any better, though. He’d forgotten that he was a young boy and that Oberyn’s negligence was not the standard by which behaviour should be measured. Randyll Tarly felt responsible for them, and that wouldn’t end until they were in the care of another.

*Gods, what are we going to do?*

“That’s not necessary,” Jon blurted out, voice higher than normal. He swallowed when Randyll shot him a piercing glance.

“What Jon means, my lord,” Dom continued, nonchalant, “Is that we thank you for your concern, but we are the squires of Oberyn Martell, and Northmen besides!” he laughed, proud and boastful. “We’ve travelled through three kingdoms and met bandits and scoundrels and pickpockets alike, and here we stand, whole and hale. In contrast, the kingsroad from here to Highgarden is so highly patrolled that it’s safer than most villages!”

Randyll’s stare didn’t alter.

“This is not the first time we made the journey, my lord.” Jon continued, calmer. “We’ll keep to the road and spend the nights at inns, just as we did on the way here. We wouldn’t want to impose on you any further.”

For the first time since he’d met him, Randyll Tarly smiled. It had no warmth to it. “It’s no imposition. My men will accompany you, from here to Highgarden, and watch as you board a ship and sail away. They’ll report every moment of the journey to me.” He clasped his hands on the desk, leaning forward slightly. His gaze never left Jon. “Unless you have some reason to refuse?”

Silence.

Jon swallowed.

He had nothing. Dom had nothing, judging by the queer look on his face.

He wondered if this was the first time Domeric Bolton had failed to successfully manipulate his opponent. It was a good lesson for him, at least. A terrible outcome for them, but a good lesson to curb Dom’s arrogance.

*It will only make him more dangerous.*

Now they had about seven hours to get out of this trap. If their plot was discovered, the punishment would be *much* more severe than if Jon and Sam had simply run away and gotten caught.

*****

Twenty minutes later, Jon watched Domeric pace back and forth, back and forth. They were in Jon’s room, and he’d never seen Domeric so agitated.

“I’ll take that magic potion now,” Jon mumbled. He didn’t even get a glance.

A few more seconds of pacing. This was actually fascinating because Dom’s face never changed from his blank expression. He wasn’t *feeling* anything so much as his thought process was so rapid it created excess energy, which he needed to physically purge.

“We could simply kill them and blame bandits,” Dom casually proposed.
“We are not killing them, Domeric,” Jon snapped. “Good to know that when your clever plans fail you instantly turn to murder.”

A sigh, more pacing.

“We have to wait for the Prince,” Domeric finally said. He nodded to himself. “He is…abrupt enough that he’d likely go along with this plot.”

“No,” Jon snapped, sitting straighter. “That’s…a last option.” Domeric shot him a glance, eyebrow raised, still pacing.

“Explain.”

Jon struggled to explain his thoughts. His observations. His…complicated loyalties.

“He…We came here for a reason, Dom. He hated it here; every day he was more anxious than the last—and this was before I asked to stay. Usually, if he’s not entertained enough, he’d pack us up and depart. But Horn Hill was different; I think he always planned to come here.” Jon shook his head. “This is my choice, Dom—helping Sam. I don’t want it to implicate him. If he’s not here, if we get away before he returns, then at most he’d be at fault for bringing us. But if he helps us and we’re caught, it could ruin…important plans for him.”

And maybe those plans are so important that he’d give Sam up in order to win Lord Randyll’s gratitude.

Oberyn was a complex creature. Jon wasn’t deluded enough to say he could predict him.

Dom tilted his head. “You are aware that whatever plot he carries is likely to…destabilize matters.”

Jon struggled with his feeling. Yes, he knew; very well in fact. He knew what Oberyn wanted; justice for his sister, his niece and nephew. Justice on the end of his spear. And Jon couldn’t even find fault with it, because he imaged his own sisters, imagined Dany, being brutally murdered like Elia Martell. He imagined tiny children butchered.

No, Jon didn’t fault the man on his desire for vengeance. He could emphasize only too well.

Jon felt he owed Oberyn Martell. He’d helped Jon evolve from that scared boy to someone confident. Dark Sister was in his hands because Oberyn went North. The moss was a direct result of Oberyn waking Jon up to the reality of the world. The prince had even helped Jon sell it by avoiding Highgarden and giving him lessons of their Queen of Thornes. Oberyn had shown him more of the world than he’d ever dreamed, made him hunger to see more.

Oberyn had taught him the lesson of home.

The prince of Dorne had won Jon Snow’s loyalty, for good or for ill.

Jon didn’t want to steal his vengeance. This was his plan, his desire to free Sam. He’d see it through alone, to whatever end.

“He’s a last resort,” Jon restated.

Domeric contemplated him. “One day, your loyalties will clash and you’ll face a crossroad. A path chosen has no return.”

Jon met his gaze. “We share that in common, then, Bolton.”
Domeric only smiled.

Jon stood up, resolute. The answer had tickled the back of his mind for days now. “I’m done with clever plans, Dom. Done with manipulation and politics. I’m going to plead my case.”

Two raised brows. “You’re giving Samwell up? A logical choice which may alleviate some of lord Tarly’s ire, but not one I’d anticipated form you. Note that this does not meet our agreement is void.”

Jon snorted, “No, that would be too generous of you.” He shook his head. “I’m not giving up, Dom; I’m going to ask for help—as we should have done from the start.”

At dawn, they met at the northern gate, horses packed. Feeling Dark Sister’s weight on his back made him almost nostalgic. It had been hidden under his bed for four months; it felt like sacrilege to keep it in darkness.

Soon, I’ll wield it.

Jon and Dom found three guards waiting for them, as well as Lord Randyll and Lady Melessa. He relayed instructions to his men, but Jon paid him no mind. The Lady of the House had her hands folded before her and staring at him, a warning and a softening equal.

They travelled with Randyll’s men for three days. They boarded a large merchant ship, paying the fee quietly and not bothering to haggle. The entire time, the men watched them: their faithful gaolers. When they finally set sail, Jon saw the trio turns from the dock and depart. Another man, cloaked in dark wool, watched them until the shore disappeared from view.

“We—I didn’t think you would aid us, my lady,” Jon replied, quietly, taking on the burden alone. Lady Melessa sat in the music room, playing the harp and not looking up after Jon had told her the whole story. It had been difficult to initially convince her to listen rather than call the guards to drag them away. Since the fake fight, Lady Melessa had been much less hesitant about expressing her dislike. Domeric and Talla stood by the door. “Sam knows you love him…”

She played a few notes, and Jon politely ignored the tears trailing down her face. Her voice shook. “My husband…he cares for me. He honours me.” Her eyes grew hazy from memories. “I have a mother and sisters and aunts and cousins…Jon. There are many men that do neither.”

She took a breath, tilting her head forward to cover her face with long brown strands. “I have stood by him all these years and I’ve accepted it—his treatment of my son. Accepted it because I know how deeply my husband loves his House. That he would fall on his own sword before he lets harm come to his family. So, I looked away, because I know an heir must…but, Sam did try this time—he did try, and I was so hopeful…”

A small sob—quickly halted. Jon couldn’t help but pity her.

By the door, Talla had tears running down her face, her small body shaking. Of all of Sam’s siblings, Jon had only seen Talla show him love. Dickon took his fathers cue and either ignored or scorned him. The other girls cared more for Lord Randyll’s regard than Sam’s.

“I...will help you. Once, only once, will I disobey my husband. Once will I dishonour him. May the gods forgive me.”

As a Florent, she was accompanied by a small retinue of guards and maids when she married into Horn Hill. She had little power in her home, little say in lands and castles and alliances.
But every lady had at least one loyal man.

*****

His very first memory was of Stannis walking away.

Renly Baratheon did not remember his parents; when they’d died, he’d been barely one year old. No one ever spoke of them at Storm’s End, not even in whispers, and Renly had always believed that was Stannis’s doing. Stannis who barred Renly from any link to his parents.

All he’d had of them was a horse that had been his father’s favourite steed, and an array of colourful clothing that had been his mother’s.

But falling asleep in the stables, or clutching his mother’s perfumed dress, was a poor substitute for parents.

Growing up, the only family Renly had was Stannis. Scary, mean Stannis with his face in a permanent scowl. Once, as a tiny boy, he’d tried to get Stannis to play with him, only to be handed off to Maester Cressen without a word. He’d never tried again.

But he was better off, he soon he learned. No one wanted to be friends with Stannis: Renly shouldn’t want to either. His elder brother would haunt the halls of Storm’s End like a phantom, bringing ice and gloom wherever he stepped. Laughter would cease when Stannis entered a room—tension would replace it even after his brother left.

Renly didn’t want to be like Stannis; when he entered a room, he wanted to bring laughter with him.

He wanted to be like Robert, his eldest brother, who would come home mayhap twice a year with gifts and hugs and bring light to the castle. Even cold Stannis couldn’t ruin the fun if Robert was there. His eldest brother was strong and powerful and handsome, and everyone loved him. In his presence, Stannis truly was a phantom: but this time invisible and impotent.

Renly adored those times when Robert was home.

He soaked them up, knowing they never lasted long.

Knowing soon he’d be left with Stannis, his brother who couldn’t stand him.

Then the Rebellion happened, and all was proved true: Stannis truly hated him. Stannis had no warmth in his soul just like he had no laughter in his throat.

Stannis butchered father’s horse and made him eat it.

Then his dog. Then the cats. Then the rats.

And when even those were all gone, still Stannis didn’t yield.

His brother chose to starve him.

Stannis ran a cold, gloomy castle where hunger and horror were Renly’s shadows for months. He couldn’t sleep from the hunger, he couldn’t breathe from it. Over the walls, he saw the Tyrell camp, merry and plentiful, with fires roasting pigs and cows and chickens.

Every day he stood on the rampant, staring at those fires, smelling the meat, his mouth saturated in saliva.
Every night he lay in bed crying for his parents, for Robert, for someone to come and make Stannis stop.

He begged and begged and begged Stannis; he was so hungry and there was food outside. If they only opened the gates, the Tyrells would share their food! Stannis only loomed over him, “Cease crying. They are our enemies.”

Renly cried and yell, insisted Stannis was wrong! They looked nice; they sang around the campfires and their laughter reached the walls. They’d share, they would! He’d screamed and screamed and screamed it.

Stannis had order Maester Cressen to give Renly milk that made him sleepy.

When the Rebellion ended, and Stannis left, Renly gouged himself on food until he was sick. He would throw up and then eat some more.

Then news came that Renly was Lord of Storm’s End, and he didn’t understand. What was a lord? He only knew what Stannis did, walking and ordering and bringing tension.

So, he’d be like Robert, he decided. A lord who everyone loved.

No one would have starved Robert: he was everyone’s friend. He would show mean Stannis what a real lord was! Stannis would have to listen to him now, he’d have to.

**He’ll have to be nice to me because I’m Lord of Storm’s End.**

He hadn’t understood then that Stannis wouldn’t be staying. He’d only understood when his brother had returned, ordered him to “Uphold your responsibilities to the land, Renly.” Then Stannis had turned and walked away.

He’d taken Maester Cressen with him and left Renly among strangers.

“He’s not changed at all,” Renly said, standing before the mirror and tilting his head back obediently for the valet. The carefully scrape of the razor shaved away the stubble that had grown during the day.

“Well then, why are you bothering with this?” Loras asked, and Renly could hear him roll his eyes. “This…dinner.”

“To be perfectly honest, I didn’t think the annoying chit would succeed,” Renly said, tilting his chin up. “Stannis hasn’t said one non-business word to me since I became Master of Laws. I didn’t think he’d ever lower himself and invite me.”

He clenched his teeth, irritated. How had Daenerys Targaryen done it?

“I gave my word and knowing her, she’d only—loudly—follow after me asking why I didn’t show up. Gods but the girl has no sense of propriety!”

Loras snorted from behind, but Renly couldn’t look lest he wanted to slash his own throat. Still, he didn’t have to: his squire would be reclining, bored, on the settee. “If grandmama hadn’t asked me to get close to the girl, although why she’d bother is beyond me, then we wouldn’t have had to spend so much time humouring her.”

“I hope she leaves me alone after this. Sees that her idiotic quest to ‘repair’ our bond is a fool’s dream.”
Renly remembered the first time she’d walked up to him and blatantly introduced herself, holding her chin up and almost challenging. He’d made nice with her, of course; he was courteous to everyone, and Loras wanted him to make an effort with the girl. She’d wanted to know why he and ‘Cousin Stannis’ were so distant—she’d insisted on hearing the whole story. He’d obliged and told her the truth about Stannis, about how he was heartless—he’d made a jest of it, of course—but the irritating thing only shook her head and told him he was ‘wrong’.

The girl grated on all his nerves.

“She never shuts up,” Renly muttered. “‘Cousin Stannis’ this and ‘Cousin Stannis’ that. You’d think Stannis conquered the moon, with how much she talks about him.”

The stupid girl actually loved his brother; she believed Stannis loved her. Stupid, senseless idiot! She’d never been forced to starve. Try claiming Stannis Baratheon loved anything after you spent a year with horrible, unquenchable cramps that didn’t abate even months after the Siege’s end.

The seas would dry up and the stars would fall before Stannis grew a heart.

“Gods,” Loras said in agreement. “A dull girl. Pretty, yes, but nothing else. You’d have to be dull to like Stannis Baratheon.”

“He’s still my brother, Loras,” Renly chided half-heartedly. He got a snort in response.

“At least she seems to like you—too dull to see you’re only pitying her. I compliment the girl and get nothing,” Loras muttered a few moments later, familiar irritation in his tone. This was a popular topic of complaint. Their dislike of Daenerys Targaryen was one more thing they had in common.

“Sometimes I’m even genuine and still she stares at me as if I were some insect buzzing about her head.”

Renly laughed at that, staying as still as possible. “That, she learned from Stannis!”

The valet finished the last scrape and handed Renly a towel to wipe off the excess foam. The man made his way over to the wardrobe to choose a tunic for dinner. Renly planned to dress as extravagantly as possible: he relished seeing Stannis’s lip curl when he did so.

Renly loved bright colours and soft fabrics and perfumes. Seeing Stannis’s displeasure was a welcome bonus.

The settee shifted. Loras appeared at his side, carefully inspecting the work. He trailed his fingers softly over the newly shaved skin of his chin. His thumb brushed against Renly’s bottom lip.

Their eyes met.

Later.

He’d get through this farce of a meal and then come back to a pleasant dessert.

“Margaery still complains about that betrothed of hers—the bastard. Calls him ‘The Dullard of the North.’”

“Gods, not again with the bastard,” Renly complained. “I’d take her talking about Stannis over him. ‘Loyal and honest and kind.’”

“‘Strong and true and talented,’” Loras popped up, mocking.
“You’d think the boy was a saint, with how she tall she builds his pedestal. I could almost pity the little idiot; she’s been duped so easily.”

Loras chucked. “Pity her yourself; I’d give anything to be there when they meet, to see that pretty image shatter.”

Renly stepped away, tsking with a smirk, so the valet could help him into his under tunic. Loras brushed the man’s hands away and did the task himself, letting his fingers trail over Renly’s bared skin. Goosebumps followed in their wake, making Renly shiver pleasantly.

Later.

“You’d think being stripped naked would make her reserved,” he speculated as his ever-silent valet brought his deep green overtunic and matching embroidered deerskin gloves. “I’d have been unable to show my face. Instead, she appears and sits with us as if she belongs there. The lads even laugh at her openly and she just stares them down and turns away as if she were a queen and they smallfolk.”

Loras snickered at that. “For a disgraced daughter, she doesn’t act like one. It’s why the king has that perpetual scowl on his face. She should play meek and defeated, the fool. Oh, if only he were present more often, Ren: only around him does she make herself scarce.”

Renly wished Robert were around more often as well, but his use as a repellent for the girl was only a small part of that desire. He pushed the melancholy away, well practised.

He invited me to a hunt just last month.

“If nothing else,” he finally said. “This dinner will be an entertaining story. I’ll tell them how Stannis was so desperate for my company that he wrote an invitation by hand!”

They spoke of twists and spins they could add to make the tale bigger and more interesting until Renly was dressed, coffered, and his hair styled in gentle waves. The valet departed silently. Renly regarded himself in the mirror, pleased.

I look just like Robert use to.

“You’re the most handsome man in the Seven Kingdoms,” Loras murmured, voice soft.

Renly met his sincere gaze, chest warm. “That title belongs to you, my love. Don’t protest,” he insisted when Loras opened his mouth. “I love watching them appreciate you, knowing that you’re mine.”

The kiss was gentle; a promise.

With Loras by his side, he was no longer lonely. He thanked the gods every day that he’d found him.

*****

Renly had greeted the family with his usual flare, bowing over Lady Myra’s hand and thanking her for the meal with an eloquence the poets could only dream of.

That had been over twenty minutes ago, and not even the Lady Myra’s polite, stilted topics were enough to get the conversation flowing. Poor woman probably faced this farce every evening, since Stannis apparently always dinned alone with his family. She’d was no doubt begging for some good company, but after his last jest was met only with half-hearted laughter, he couldn’t bring himself to bother again.
Renly swirled his wine, sitting perfectly straight according to etiquette, and stared around the small, private dining table. It only sat six; tiny compared to the one Renly had in his own suite of rooms. As a consequence, they were all uncomfortably close to one another; he could reach across the table and take young Steffon’s glass if he wanted to.

Stannis was at the head, immediately to his right. His son sat beside him, with the Targaryen on his right, and Lady Myra at the other head. The seat beside him was empty; he’d have brought Loras along but hadn’t wanted to force him to weather this dull event.

Renly signed, looking out the window at the stars. They were eating their appetizer now; Only four more courses and he could leave. Gods, he wouldn’t even have an entertaining story from this evening. What a waste of his night.

At least the meal was good. He’d have to get his cook to inquire after the recipe for these boiled quail eggs and the accompany cheese topping.

A clatter drew his attention; Stannis was finished and had put down his fork, waiting for the rest with an impatient set to his mouth. He’d kept his eyes trained on his plate since they’d sat down. Renly swore then to take as long as he reasonably could on each course, even if he had to weather this awkwardness for longer than necessary.

Anything to see some emotion on Stannis’s face.

“My compliments to your cook, my lady,” Renly smiled. “These eggs are superb.”

Lady Myra glanced up. Her smile was a tad pained, trembling slightly. Renly could understand how awkward she must feel. She was beautiful, with pale golden hair and nearly colourless blue eyes, and her voice had a pleasant cadence. As the daughter of a powerful House, she’d likely expected her choice of husband—before the Rebellion. Then Stannis took Dragonstone and the poor woman had likely been sold like cattle by her enterprising father.

“I’ll pass on your kind words, my lord,” she replied, quiet.

“Lord Renly, you like to sail,” Daenerys blurted out; he was surprised it had taken her this long. “We take a ship out onto the bay a few times a month; perhaps you’d like to accompany us.”

Steffon looked up, pouting at her as if the offer was some punishment.

“A kind off, my lady,” Renly said, smile tight. “But the laws of the lands rarely give me such long stretches of leisure time.”

A very blatant lie considering how often he went hunting.

She looked to Stannis with a wide-eyed, almost mulish look of expectation on her face. The Lord of Dragonstone sent her an irritated look, exhaling through his nose. He ground his teeth and worked his jaw. “Lord Renly is busy, Daenerys; the Master of Laws oversees the trials for lawbreakers—one thing this dangerous—” he emphasized pointedly, to Renly’s bemusement “—city has plenty of.”

Maybe his brother had finally agreed to this dinner to shut the obnoxious thing up. That Renly could understand.

Daenerys narrowed her eyes, frowning. Then she sighed as if all her patience was gone.

“My cousin is happy at Dragonstone,” she informed him. “He no longer envies you for getting Storm’s End, so you can make amends now.”
A beat of shocked silence.

“Daenerys!” Stannis boomed, slamming his goblet down. Renly’s eyes grew huge, his mouth falling open. He didn’t know what shocked him more, her words or Stannis’s reaction. “Hold your tongue!”

She flinched, hunching for a moment, looking shocked. Then she drew up her shoulders. “You told me you loved him, cousin! So why are you both so—so cold?!” She looked between them, eyes swimming with tears. “Stop it! You’re brothers! Brothers! A family! Stop throwing it all away!” she shrieked.

Stannis stood, lips bloodless, teeth clenched so tightly they were apt to shatter at any moment. His voice was the icy chill reminiscent of the Stannis that starved a castle. “This dinner is over, Daenerys Targaryen, and I’ve had enough of your spoiled attitude and thoughtless lectures on things you have no understanding of!”

She flinched away again, lips trembling. Steffon looked between her and his father, eyes blown huge as if he’d never seen a conflict between them. Lady Myra gripped her goblet, completely pale. Sweat was gathering on her brow.

Renly began to laugh.

A great, mocking laugh that went on and on. He laughed so hard his eyes filled with tears and he bent over the table, slamming his hand on the wood at the sheer hilarity of this scene. He felt a part of him snapped, some iron chest that he’d been filling for years finally burst.

He’d never have acted like this in public.

“Love?” he snickered, blinking through the tears with a mean, open-mouthed grin. “He told you he loved me!” he threw his head back, tears rolling down his face. “Gods Stannis, I never took you for a liar!”

Stannis’s hands began to shake. He thrust his shoulders back and stared down at him with a cold, implacable look. “I am no liar;” he bit out.

Renly snickered again, loud and disbelieving—tinged with hysteria. Oh, the hilarity would kill him!

“You starved me! Starved us all! You butchered my horse and fed him to me—Father’s only gift, the only thing I had of him, and you butchered him!” Renly gashed his teeth, surging to his feet and slamming both hands onto the table. “You call that love, you soulless monster!?”

Stannis gripped the material of his pants so hard his knuckles went white. “I did what I had to. I kept you safe—I kept our home from enemy hands. The home you now use as you please, your squire the son of the man who laid siege upon us! I did my duty and stopped them from marching north and turning the tied of battle.”

“Stannis,” Lady Myra murmured, voice shaking.

Renly had a queer sense that he was badly shaking, but he didn’t feel it. Couldn’t. “Ah yes, your duty—that was the only thing important to you, wasn’t it? I cried, starved, and begged you and you chose your duty—and call it love! You were no brother—a brother would have surrendered for his family. No—you, you’d see us all die as long as your precious idea of justice is upheld. You’ve no warmth inside you—like that precious metal of yours.”

Daenerys stood up at that, mouth open to defend her cousin, but Stannis thrust his hand in her direction, not looking away from Renly. She faltered, mute. Stannis looked every inch as emotionless
as he’d been thus accused.

This is the Stannis I know. Look well and see him as he truly is!

“Stannis,” Lady Myra said again, quieter. “Stannis—”

Stannis shook his head, gaze never leaving Renly’s. “Mayhap I am cold and cruel and soulless—but better that than a weak boy with no principle. A squalling child that would perform tricks to get a few laughs, never seeing the shallowness for what it is—refusing to understand reason beyond your narrow scope. Always emotional, throwing a tantrum if you didn’t get your way.”

Renly’s mouth twisted, trembling. The tears were still there, but he’d long since stopped laughing. “‘Too sensitive,’ wasn’t it, Stannis? That’s what you accused me of being, what you dismissed me in childhood. Any emotion, any desire for comfort in place of mother and father—” he broke off, swallowing. “No, we never could meet your standards, could they? Robert was ‘too brash’, I ‘too sensitive’, his friends all ‘fools’ and mine all ‘perfumed lordlings’. You never tire of judging others, do you? It’s why you were always alone.”

Stannis’s eyes widened, and he paled as if he’d been struck. Renly knew it wasn’t hurt on his brother’s face—at most he was insulted.

He was suddenly so…exhausted. His soul felt hollow.

Renly carefully straightened from where he’d been hunched over the table. He folded his hands behind his back, gripping tightly. He fell sick—humiliated. But at least he’d finally confirmed that Stannis didn’t care.

Then he turned and bowed gracefully to them. He turned to Lady Myra, keeping his eyes on the table. “I apologize for my behaviour, My Lady. I am unwell and must retire.”

There was no response.

Myra Baratheon pitched to the side and fell off her chair. Her body made a quiet thud as it landed.

Her chair was soaked with blood.

And that’s when Renly learned that he had no idea who Stannis Baratheon was.

No man could make such a sound if he didn’t know love.

*****

The family and the guards and the servants and Renly Baratheon were all present outside lady Myra’s rooms when her agonized scream pierced the silence. She began wailing as if something had reached inside her and torn out her soul.

In the wake of her torment, Renly suddenly felt like all his bitterness and hurt and resentment were foolish, stupid things.

Daenerys was curled up on the floor, clutching Steffon’s small, doll-like form in her arms. She’d been shaking since they’d raced after Stannis, who had swept his wife into his arms and run to his maester. Now her shaking was joined by tears. A blond maid held both children, head bowed.

The door burst open with a resounding bang of wood on stone. Renly glimpsed Lady Myra’s dishevelled form clutching a small, bloody blanket. Her wails were suddenly so loud in the stillness
of the hall. Every man and woman present looked to the floor.

The maester stood at the Lady’s side, his hands bloody. He looked as if he’d aged a thousand years.

Stannis strode out of the room, face like granite. He shoved past the servants, uncaring of their stares. Lady Myra looked up, ashen, and watched her husband stride away.

Renly watched him as well, reminded of his childhood.

For the first time, Renly wondered how Stannis Baratheon coped with grief.

Chapter End Notes

I considered leaving it as a cliffhanger after the miscarriage, but I didn't want to cheapen Myra's pain by using it for shock value. A miscarriage is an emotionally draining, horrible thing and I avoided writing it for a long time. I apologize to anyone that hoped for a happier chapter.
Each step down the mountain felt heavier than the last, and even though the air at the tip was thinner and more taxing to the lungs, Mya Stone felt as if breathing was becoming more difficult the farther down she went. She’d never before experienced such a thing during her dozens—nay, hundreds—of trips, some for pleasure and some as a guide. It was not the air that stole her breath, she knew, but the fear. She’d never felt such terror, she who climbed mountains for job and joy.

All her life, it was the Mountains of the Moon that had housed her, given her strength and courage, to the point that she’d seen herself as their daughter, in place of that vague memory of a tall dark man that had never acknowledged her. She knew who he was, although she’d never felt kinship beyond a faint sense of melancholy. Mya was a sensible girl, and she knew that a man who sat the Iron Throne would have no time for a natural born daughter.

But that was alright, because she didn’t need another father. A father was for protection, love, and respect, and Mya had found the mountains of the Vale more than able to fulfil all three. They were the greatest sentries in all of Westeros, and since the Arryn’s had raised their banner in the Eyrie, no army had ever conquered them. Only dragons could subdued them, because the sky ruled the earth, but the dragons were all dead. Respect the mountains, and they’d show you kindness, love them, and they’d share their secrets.

Mya had always done both, and it was not vanity that led her to claim that she knew these mountains better than anyone. She could scale them in the dark without needing a lantern, she’d played in their peaks and foothills, befriended Valemen and Mountain clan alike. Here, amongst their soaring peaks, she’d discovered herself and a boy she loved, who loved her in return. Despite how far apart they were—he, a trueborn son of a lord, she, a bastard girl—she’d never doubted him, nor his promise that they’d one day be together.

Mychel would never betray me, she’d often though, but here she was betraying him. Leaving with
barely a word, although they both knew there was no choice.

The king had summoned her away from her mountains, away from protection and familiarity and love, away from a life she knew, a place she understood. She didn’t know if she’d ever return. Around her, pine trees rose like sentries, and mountains fell like molehills. It was so warm down here. Mya Stone turned around in her saddle, seeing the Bloody Gate in the far distance, and she felt like she would cry.

*I must be brave,* she thought.

*I will adjust,* she thought.

*A new adventure,* she thought.

“I want to go home,” she whispered.

*****

Dear Jon,

It was my nameday yesterday. One year ago, it was the best day I could dream of, and now I’m completely wretched. Let me tell you a story Jon, to show you what a horrible person I am. You see, I grew up happy. Despite everything, I was so blessed, and Stannis Baratheon was the source of it all. He is the person most dear to me, and I betrayed him.

Growing up, I came to know my cousin as a quiet and dutiful man. Unless he is away inspecting the lands or in the Great Hall listening to his people, one can nearly always find him in his study. At Dragonstone, his study is a massive thing, but sparse and uninviting. There is one large rectangular desk, three plain chairs, and one large bookshelf beside the small unadorned window. The grandest thing within is a huge, beautifully painted map of the known world, which dominates the eastern wall. I was three the first time I escaped Myra’s watch, and I ran into his study because I thought to hide under the desk. My cousin was in there however, hunched over his work. I must have bothered him, Jon, now that I think about it. He never said so, and since his expression rarely changed, it never occurred to me that I had no business being there at all.

I can’t remember how it happened, but I ended up seated atop the desk, held in place by his arm as he continued to write whatever he wrote. My questions were endless, and eventually he simply sat back and spent his time answering. I must have been very annoying, but my cousin never sent me away nor grew impatient with me. I think he liked that I was interested—I think it must be a very lonely thing to spend all day alone in a small room. It became a routine, and nearly once a day I would end up seated at his desk, usually for an hour or so. Sometimes, he would take me with him as he dealt with the laws of Dragonstone, setting me on a pile of pillows at the foot of his throne. (I only realized how odd his treatment of me was after I came to King’s Landing—how indulged I was. People must have questioned him about it, because I know the way I was raised is strange for a ward, particularly for a female one, but don’t let it be said that my cousin is one to care for the opinions of others.)

At his side I learned about lords and ladies and castles and responsibilities, about what a lowborn was and what a highborn should be, about justice and laws and fairness. Sometimes he would perch me on his hip and stand before that beautiful map, and he’d tell me about the many places his ships sailed to, the reports the captains returned with. Places neither of us would ever see. I must have amassed dozens of questions for maester Cressen.

*It was only about my name that we didn’t speak of. It was Myra that taught me about House*
Targaryen, as much or as little as she thought was proper. She taught me of their legacy—my legacy—and to feel pride. And then, after coming to King’s Landing, she taught me of my father and of my mother and brothers. (I never even knew Viserys existed before then. I think it was painful for her to think of him, because she’d have gone with us, if only I were born sooner.) She taught me to hold my pride close, to use it as a shield, because the world wouldn’t forgive me for it. “We can’t forget where we came from, my love, because it’s part of who we are.” Myra must have a story too—but now it’s too late to ask her. I’m always too late, Jon.

I ruined everything. I wanted to fix it, but I ruined it instead.

We were in the solar when it all began, just a month after Cersei Lannister was sent away. My cousin sat at his small writing desk reviewing correspondents, and I sat at his arm as usual, trying to chat about my day with the ease I’d once had. Myra was reading by the fire, and Ryelle was chasing after Steffon, trying to catch him. She was nearly three and loved nothing more than her big brother. Steffon pretended to dislike it, but he’d always be smiling.

I stopped to watch them, playing so innocently, bound by blood and love. The smile on my lips faded and watching them began to... hurt. The sweet scene seemed to stab me, Jon, and made me bleed a foreign bitterness.

I am not one for gods, not one much for faith. I was raised by a man who scorns worship and a woman who sees it as another chore to be completed. Besides, the royal family didn’t tolerate my presence at the Great Sept every week, so there was no High Septon to teach me his version of the gods. But my maid believes, so clearly and sweetly, and she’s told me stories that are dear to her, of the Seven and their love and hatred for humans. Some tales made me laugh, others made me cry, and a few angered me, but I never did believe them to be anything more than stories.

But if the gods are real, I’m sure they must have punished me for my next question.

I asked my cousin if he thought Viserys loved me.

That was cruel of me, I know. (I think I did it to be cruel.) He isn’t a man comfortable with emotion, and he especially does his best to avoid questions of my family—especially of Viserys. He doesn’t like to lie Jon, even indirectly, so he’d never be able to answer that kind of inquiry since he had no way of knowing if it were true. Usually, I obliged him and kept those questions for Myra, because in this one case she was ever the romantic. But watching Steffon and Ryelle together, his children by blood as compared to a mere ward forced upon him, I felt something dark driving me.

And then I was crueler still, and asked him about his younger brother. I said “You haven’t seen Lord Renly in ten years, cousin; when he was just a boy. Do you love him?”

I saw the way he froze, jaw tight and eyes fixed on his work. We both knew what I was really asking, we both knew the trap in my words. Really, what answer was left to my cousin but the truth, much as he loathed to say it. His “I do” seemed to be torn from him, and he got up and left soon after. I was plagued with such guilt that it nearly swallowed me. I hated myself for that cruel impulse, which forced him to either acknowledge his feeling or hurting me by keeping silent.

It was guilt that drove my new found desire to mend whatever separated my cousin from his youngest brother. When Lord Renly was made Master of Laws just mere months later, it seemed like a sign. I was determined to make my cousin happy by reuniting them, to give back for all he’d done for me, to show that I loved him most. (And perhaps I wanted proof that ten years couldn’t destroy a bond of blood.) But I was arrogant Jon—I’m shamed to admit it seems to be a great failing of mine. I didn’t understand enough about the situation, I didn’t know who ‘Stannis Baratheon’ was before he became my cousin. I didn’t take Lord Renly’s opinions of him seriously, nor pay attention to my
cousin’s terrible reluctance to speak with his brother. I knew the facts about the Siege of Storm’s End, but I didn’t stop to think about what such an experience could do to a person. I forced the dinner upon everyone, focused only on my own views and goals.

And I ruined everything.

Myra lost her child, Jon. That dinner was so horrible that she lost her babe. The pain of watching my cousin and lord Renly fight was too great for her, and she collapsed. There was so much blood Jon, and my cousin made a sound that...

I never want to hear it again. It’s all my fault. I know it is. Myra refuses to see me. Not even Steffon or Ryelle are permitted into her rooms. (Steffon knows it’s my fault.) She hasn’t left them in over a fortnight, and it’s all my fault. My cousin hasn’t left his study, and I can’t bring myself to go in. He hates me now, I know it.

My jealousy and blindness broke the only family I have. When will you reach Dorne, Jon? I want to talk to you. Please.

Dany

First Moon, 295 AC

20th Day

*****

A lordling, a bastard, and a runaway walk into a Citadel…

Oberyn Martell leaned forward, feeling particularly moody as he rested both forearms on the merlon and tracked the cloaked group below. He stood on the wall above the Citadel’s Main Gate, watching as they road closer, the two smaller figures sharing a horse. Despite the concealment, he knew they were his idiots, because one of them had a suspicious lump jutting straight up from his cloak, distorting his outline. Oberyn, who’d grown accustomed to the sight months ago, knew the hunch was due to a very valuable weapon strapped to the boy’s back. It made for a strange silhouette that often had others doing double-takes.

It also made Jon easy to spot, even from three stories above.

They were attempting to walk through the crowd as if they belonged—and came across as completely conspicuous because of it. Not to mention how they were the only ones completely covered on this hot day, while the milling novices, maesters, and visitors wore their lightest clothes. Some were even fanning themselves.

Were Tyene at his side, she’d be rolling her eyes. His idiots would never be successful spies.

The three figures crossed through the gate, flanked by giant green sphinxes, and disappeared from his view. They’d no doubt pause just in the gate, taking in what they could see of the Citadel with the awe of new eyes. The maesters’ institution was built on the eastern shore of the Honeywine river and accessible from three gates. It had three courtyards, a stable, a sorting hall just within the gate, a cemetery for archmaesters, a well-used smithy, a scribe’s hall for hiring alcholytes to read and write letters, the Seneschal’s Court to punish petty crimes, a sept, and a massive Great Hall used for meals and meetings. On the far end, opposite the main Gate and behind the majority of these structures were eight tall, interconnecting towers, each six stores high. They were connected via massive stone bridges that linked their fourth levels—or third, in one’s case—and high above the milling people
below. At all hours of the day, the bridges would be abuzz with activity. They were peppered with small house and stalls covered in merchants’ wares, leaving only a narrow path for walking.

There were five lecture towers, each topped with maesters’ offices; a library tower, holding all the accessible books; a dormitory tower, in which novices were packed in like rats; and the archmasters’ private tower, separated from the rest of the Citadel by a private walled courtyard. The archmaster’s lair and library were unique in that they were directly connected, no bridge, and both were build on a small hill so they rose a storey higher than the rest. Furthermore, archmaster’s tower built within the western wall, partly in the river itself and forming the end of the Weeping Docks. Also on the river was the oldest Ravenry in Westeros, standing bereft on the Isle of Ravens and connected to the rest of the Citadel by a rickety wooden bridge. The thin, ancient structure was covered in thick vines and soft moss. Also on the island was a single weirwood tree, hidden shamefully behind the tower, which the ravens flocked to. During his residency, Oberyn had enjoyed climbing up the branches and laying in the cool shade, avoiding lessons and irate maesters. No one but the rare northern maester ever frequent the place. The ravens had never disturbed him, they were tamed birds and used to humans company, so they’d simply hop away as he came near and squawk to each other while he napped.

He’d take Jon there before they left, Oberyn thought. He was not a very devout man himself—too many gods on this planet, and each with too many rules—but his family was, and places of worship were important. The boy hadn’t seen a weirwood in ages, nor would he for some time.

First, he had to get the unsavory matters out of the way.

Oberyn pushed back from the wall and headed towards one of the lecture towers. He climbed down from the wall, made his way though the dirt paths, and entered the Dorm, since it was closest, pushing aside annoyed novices while he climbed up four flights of stairs before exiting again into the wide, sunlit bridge. He dodged enthusiastic sellers, speeding novices, and the occasional meandering maester. The three idiots would have made it to the sorting hall by now, and probably already been intercepted by a novice instructed to bring them to him. At the very least, they’d know this was unusual—at most they’d know what awaited them.

Or what they thought awaited.

Luckily for those boys, Oberyn’s emotions were currently best described as complicated.

When he’d left Horn Hill, he’d have a vague idea of what they’d do—what Jon would do. He wouldn’t have helped them out—he wasn’t outright disloyal—but his absence was opportunity enough. They had mostly fulfilled his predictions, although, granted, he’d thought they’d get caught. When he’d let himself acknowledge his motivations, Oberyn had pictured rescuing them—and thereby ruining his relationship with House Tarly.

He’d underestimated his idiots, it seemed. They’d gotten away.

When he’d docked at Old Town a week past, during what should have been a simple exchange of goods before the ship continued north to Highgarden. He’d been genuinely surprised to find a courier waiting with a letter from Doran.

“…return home…so that I may properly deal with your negligence, brother mine…in a manner you will no doubt find comfortingly familiar.”

He was ordered to come sans squires, because they were apparently already on their way. And really, there were very few reasons they’d seek to leave Horn Hill unsupervised. So, he’d decided to stay at Citadel for a couple of weeks and see if his idiots showed up. If they did, then he’d claim
them and hopefully mediate some of Doran’s fury by arriving with them in tow. If they didn’t show… well, he’d finally find out just how angry his brother could get.

If Randyll knew what the boys had done, even if he only suspected, it could further strain matters between Tarly and Martell—exactly what Doran was trying to avoid. Yes, he’d be very angry for this.

But Obeyrn… had mixed feeling about this outcome.

He wanted retribution for Elia, for giggling Rhaenys, for tiny Aegon. He burned from the need. The months after the Usurper’s War, he’d tried to spark another rebellion by enlisting Dornishmen willing to swear to the boy-king Viserys. He’d known only rage, hungered for flesh, thirsted for blood.

Doran had caught him, imprisoned him at Sunspear, and separated his daughters so they couldn’t free him.

*There, I met Ellaria. Our Elia was born a year later.*

He’d been with her when Jon Arryn arrived, speaking of negotiations and peace, offering their uncle Lewyn’s bones in a ‘show of good faith.’ It should have been Elia he offered, her children prisoners of the crown, yes, but alive. But they hadn’t even been given her bones; she’d been burned alongside the children in the ‘Targaryen way’.

*To hide what had been done to her body.*

In response, Doran had publicly sworn allegiance to Robert Baratheon. The final spark of rebellion died.

Oberyn’s fury had known no bounds. He’d escaped his lavish chambers, murdered his guards, and hunted for the Prince. His bloodlust had painted the world crimson. It took six guards to take him down, including Doran’s massive dog, Areo Hotah. Oberyn had raged and screamed, more beast than man, and Doran had ordered him imprisoned in the dungeons.

It took three months for his wrath to cool enough to allow Doran near him.

“Traitor,” he spat, slumped against the corner, his greasy hair hung in his eyes as he glared up at the vile man. “Shiveling, cowardly traitor. You do not deserve the blood that runs through your veins. The blood of conquerors. How does it feel, brother, to live with Elia’s murder on your hands? To kneel before her killers? How does it feel!”

He made to lunge forward, but Hotah kicked him back against the wall and thrust the tip of his greatax against his chest, a blatant warning. Oberyn never even glanced at him, too focused on the coward that shared his blood. Had his mother been alive, she’s have killed this failed child of hers. Killed him and mourned her true heir; the daughter murdered by lions.

*Doran stood tall, hands clasped behind his back, as rigid as he’d ever been. His face revealed nothing, and Oberyn hated him.*

You have broken my heart, Doran!

“I make you one promise, brother. One promise in this life, one promise before the next. Should I fail to uphold it, I will welcome your spear’s judgement. Hear me, Oberyn of House Nymeros Martell, and remember.”

Oberyn only stared, anger waning. Slowly, Doran’s calm expression cracked, bit by bit, muscle by
muscle. His brother began shaking, lips splitting to revealing gnashing teeth.

“By the blood of Martell that conquered great Dorne, by the blood of Nymyria that choose sea over enslavement, by the blood of our House which weathered the fire, and by the blood of Elia and her slain children, the rightful heirs of the Seven Kingdoms, I, Doran Nymeros Martell, Prince of Dorne, swear those butchers will die.”

He learned forward, so close Oberyn felt his brother’s breath when he hissed, “Hear me, brother: vengeance is my promise.” He learned closer, lips nearly touching. “And I demanded your service.”

The tears fell freely after that.

Oberyn had believed him and sworn loyalty both as a brother and as a prince. Loyalty everlasting, loyalty to his promise.

In ten years, his desire for vengeance hadn’t waned, but what he’d accept had changed. In contrast, what Doran would accept had only increased. His brother was going towards the path of retribution by any means necessary, and even Oberyn couldn’t predict the lengths he’d go to fulfill his goals. While Doran still faithfully played the weak, feeble man with a well of endless patience underneath, something about him had changed these last years. Oberyn couldn’t see the cause, and Doran always softly insisted his younger brother was mistaken when he confronted. But Oberyn trusted his intuition, which told him the Prince was growing more willing to act when he’d once urged caution—but even he hadn't anticipated Horn Hill. He’d been pleasantly surprised when Doran sent him to Winterfell. Such a bold move had appealed to the Viper, and he’d been only too happy to comply. Visiting potentially loyal Houses on the way back to Dorne also appealed, because Doran finally had him doing something after years of just waiting. But when one of Doran’s loyal agents had found him at a tavern while the boys were at Highgarden, and silently slipped him instruction to evaluate the Tarlys, he was much less pleasantly surprised.

Oberyn wanted vengeance…but he didn’t want it on the blood of innocence. If it came to war —when it came to war—he knew many would die; that was a plan he was willing to accept.

Usurping the Tyrells, killing them if needed, wasn’t.

He didn’t know how Doran planned to accomplish such a thing, but even if it won them an ally in this war, Oberyn couldn’t stomach it. Highgarden had no part in Elia’s fate. Willas was his friend. The Tyrell siblings were innocent. Even old Olenna deserved better. During the Rebellion, they’d been loyal to the end. Could be loyal still, Oberyn thought, even though Doran insisted the Roses would only stand by those that could offer them power, current king be damned.

Doran only saw them as enemies—or he was forcing himself to.

Randyll was their best bet to get the Reach, he’d argued. They could promise him Highgarden and all its titles—“Warden of the South,” at the forefront—which may sway him into overlooking his hatred of Dorne. Furthermore, Tarly had been a staunch Targaryen supporter, if only because he was loyal to his oaths above all else. He could be convinced that an old oath three hundred years strong held precedence over a fledgling one to a Usurper. Such justification would appeal to his sense of ‘honor.’

Oberyn had studied the man, and could confirm these points. Not to mention that Tarly had a burning desire to turn the Reach away from the ‘superfluous weakness’ he claimed corrupted it. He blamed the Tyrells for this, and believed that as mere stewards with a negligible claim they should have never risen so high. A belief shared by many Reach Houses. If one considered all this, Oberyn
could admit he may side with them. But no man could truly predict the behaviour of another.

But Obeyrn did know himself, and he disagreed with this plot. So, he’d left his squires behind, knowing the mess they could make, and fully aware he was working against his Prince. Above schemes and rationalizations and arguments was one simple truth: if their victory was paid for by the blood of children, if they became the very monsters they hated, if they sullied their name for vengeance…

Elia would spit on them in the afterlife.

Oberyn wanted to stand proudly before her, her honor cleanly avenged, her memory untainted by dishonorable schemes. And he wanted Doran to share that with him.

_Were it up to me, I’d chose clean combat, one on one: Tywin, Robert, their murderous dogs. He wanted them wearing his spear, wanted to stare into their eyes as the life left them, wanted their final words to be acknowledgement of their crimes. A straightforward battle; a clean death. Just two men and their weapons._

But these were men that hid behind Houses and armies and games. Only Doran could strip them of their shields.

But not like this. He had to protect Dorne from sullying itself. To protect his brother from taking an irrevocable path.

_Elia kissed him, a quick brush of her lips on his, like their mother had always done. To Rhoynari, such contact was a way to breath love and protection into those you held dear._

_“Take care of him, Oberyn,” Elia murmured, fragile body concealing her passionate soul. She was a married woman now, his elder sister, his best friend. The Dornish party was due to leave the capital in the morning, and this would be the last moment of quiet between them. His throat felt tight; she’d no longer be there, waiting to scold him when he returned home with mad tales of adventure. Mocking him, with wild Ashara by her side, both of them playfully scandalized by his exploits. They were crown princess and handmaiden now, no longer girls. It would be years before he saw Elia again. Warrior help him, years. “Doran is the dreamer amongst us,” she whispered, resting her forehead against his as she’d done since he was a child. It soothed them both. “I worry he’ll get lost in them.”_

Oberyn was the killer between them—Doran does not have it in him to weather the consequences. A plan that knowingly killed the innocent would destroy him.

And Oberyn loved his brother well.

So, he’d put the Citadel into Jon’s head. He’d let Domeric’s little games continue. Then, he’d left them alone, knowing full well what they were like. One would act for justice, the other for advantage, and they’d play the game he wanted. For all their cleverness, they were fairly easy to predict. That would give Oberyn a cause to cross Randyll Tarly, which the spiteful man would likely never forgive…and perhaps make any future alliance improbable.

_You betrayed your brother, your sister, and your people, Viper. How many will die because of your whimsical morals?_

None, as it turned out. The idiots were not as predictable as expected: they’d escaped, and cleanly as far as he could tell. Oh, Randyll may suspect the truth—but that was between him and the North. Dorne had played no part, and garnered no ill will. Oberyn may have left them there, but Randyll
had agreed.

Perhaps it was destiny. Perhaps the gods had interfered to thwart his plan—or to protect Doran’s. Whichever it was, it was out of his hands now.

As Oberyn Martell walked the sunny streets of the Citadel, moving from tower to tower, level to level, he shed his contemplation like old skin. A new day, a different future, new focus.

*Squires to punish.*

Oberyn arrived at his destination and pushed open the door, releasing a giant sigh as he stepped into the room. He made directly for the window, which had a perfect view of the bridge two stories below, linking this tower to its sister across the courtyard. He crossed one leg behind the other, placed his elbow on the sill, and slumped into his hand. How annoying. Oberyn didn’t like *punishments.* He liked them even less when he was the one handing them out.

But the boys would expect some form of retribution, and Doran would question him if it was revealed that he hadn’t disciplined them.

And to be perfectly honest, he couldn’t let this stand without addressing it. Good deed or not, moral or not, Jon was playing a game he didn’t fully understand. Children rarely had good foresight.

Another sigh.

“Did you know the Lhazareen believe the soul is made of the One Light, and the Great Shepard herds little specks of it into each newborn,” a gravely voice muttered. “When a man exhales, he forfeits bits of that light, and his youth alongside it. Ravenous shadow sprites steal his breath to weave themselves a bloody crown. The light lets them live forever more.”

Oberyn tilted his head back, twisting to look over his shoulder to stare at the man he’d ignored when walking in. Archmaester Marwyn, dressed in leathers rather that the robe donned by the rest, was reading from a thick tomb while walking back and forth with great, stomping steps. He was a short, stout man with large hands and a larger belly; the hands he used to fight, the belly to drink. Marwyn looked more like a common thug than an archmaester of the Citadel. One could be forgiven for mistaking him for one, before they saw his chain—a twisted, multicoloured beast—hanging heavy around his thick neck.

“Naturally,” Marwyn finished. “A man’s sigh is a shadow’s feast.”

“If a sigh is so dangerous,” Oberyn drawled, wilfully ignoring his point. “Then I’d assume laughter is a grand old *banquet.* Who would have thought the royal fool is also the royal assassin.”

Marwyn barked out a laugh, not looking away from his book. “The perfect murder, princeling; no one suspects the jester.”

Oberyn had met him nearly twenty-two years ago at an Old Town tavern. The maester had been forty to Oberyn’s sixteen. Doran had sent him away after Lord Edgar Yronwood perished in what was *supposed* to be a quick battle to first blood. Oberyn had slept with the man’s paramour, because she’d been beautiful, and he’d been mourning. She’d been so eager that he hadn’t even needed to seduce her. Frankly, if the old man couldn’t satisfy her, he’d had no business getting pissy when she took matters into her own hands. Of course, Yornwood hadn’t shared Oberyn’s logic: when he’d caught them in bed, he’d demanded a duel. At sixteen, Oberyn was more than willing to oblige. Eager, in fact.

One simple, festering cut later, and everyone whispered that Oberyn had poisoned his blade. The
event won him the title Red Viper, while Doran gained a *diplomatic incident* to fix. That was how his nephew, Quentyn, had ended up fostered with the Yornwoods.

“And did you poison your blade?” Marwyn asked, brows raised when Oberyn recited the tale. They sat on the curb outside a seaside tavern, facing the Whispering Sound bay, comfortably tipsy and enjoying the moonlight. Oberyn had met the brutish man a few hours ago, when they’d both avidly sang along to a bard’s bawdy song. Afterwards, Oberyn had invited himself and his guards to the man’s table, assuming him a dock worker due to his stature and dress. They’d chatted about random things, sometimes light topics like travel, and then heavy one’s like how a sickness had recently claimed Obeyrn’s mother. Drink had eventually loosened his tongue enough to tell the man about why he was there. Doran would have his head if he knew Obeyrn was being so open about this, considering he’d gone to great lengths to send his brother quietly away until he ‘fixed’ matters.

Oberyn shrugged, leaning back and staring like a great cat. “Old Yronwood acted as if I were a little boy to humiliate. It was only fair to even the odds.”

Marwyn threw he head back and roared with laughter. “Ah boy, I like you! Come to the Citadel, and I’ll teach you a world’s worth of poisons.”

Oberyn’s brows shot up. “The—Citadel?”

He turned his attention to the tall, flame-tipped Keep that rose high above the buildings, its white stone tower glittering like a beacon, while its black stone base stole the light. The Hightower, the conveniently named seat of House Hightower—or maybe their House was the one conveniently named—stood in the Whispering Sound, upon Battle Island. Oberyn didn’t know much about the Citadel, that miniature city-within-a-city—but he did know it was primarily funded by the Hightowers.

“The name’s Marwyn, princeling—but most call me maester. Soon to be archmaester, if I have anything to say about it.” The man’s square jaw shifted into a savage grin. “I’ll take you under my wing—maybe you’ll also have a talent for arts far more useful than poison.”

Oberyn had remember Marwyn’s offer. He’d been sent to Lys after Old Town, his six months of ‘exile’ a pleasant vacation. When he’d finally been given leave to return, it was not to Sunspear he went, but Old Town. One generous donation later, and he was a newly minted novice. During those three and a half years, he’d learned many things. He’d even dabbled in Marwyn’s ‘more useful’ arts for a time, although he’d found that he had neither the talent nor inclination to master them. Obeyrn preferred honest steel to the arcane. He’d earned six links—three silver ones for medicine, a brass one for geography, a platinum one for foreign cultures, and one small tin link for philosophy.

To this day, he blamed that tin link for his desire to keep Doran’s hands clean.

“You’re back early. Have your runaways arrived?” Marwyn asked, slamming the book closed and throwing it onto a precociously high pile. The tower of books wobbled for a moment, but one touch from Marwyn stabilized it.

“They have—alongside the boy I *mistakenly* told you about.”

When Marwyn asked him why he’d come, Oberyn obligingly told him of his stay at Horn Hill, about his squires—the aspiring-knight and the scheming-lordling—and about Samwell the unfitting heir. He explained that, if his estimation of their scheme was correct, the boys would come here.

Too late, he noticed the queer light in Marwyn’s eyes. “Rarely do I hear you praise anyone’s intellect, princeling. And an unwilling heir, you say? What a gift you’ve brought me.”
Suddenly, Oberyn felt like a fool of sixteen once more. He’d forgotten to account for the man’s mercurial personality, and how far he’d go to achieve his goals.

Marywn seated himself, slumped back carelessly. He felt no guilt over his plans to coerce Samwell for his own ends. He pinched a sourleaf and put it in his mouth, chewing until the juice ran red over his teeth. “Yes, you’ve always found it difficult to keep your mouth shut. Would you call yourself a whore for attention, or merely a lusty maid?”

Oberyn’s smile was the razor edge of a blade. “Maybe he’ll get lucky and you find yourself in another brig to Essos.”

A barked laugh that held no amusement. “You and the dogs share the same futile hopes! The capricious bastards look for any excuse to send me away. Marwyn the Mage, they sneer, damming the title when it should be revered!” He slammed his hand on the table, the sound booming, his voice loud as he ranted. “They preach of knowledge while fearing it, hiding it, keeping it close to their breast and using it for power, ruling from their hidden throne. Jealous men without a drop of magic—funded by an enslaved House without a whisper of blood. A thousand obstacles they put before me and still, here I am, archmaester of their gods-cursed Citadel!”

He took a gasping breath, and his exhale ended in a savage smile. “They thought their little scheme for me to ‘map’ Essos would keep me away from my true goal, but the fools sent me to the very heart of magic instead.”

“So you did go to Asshai?” Oberyn asked, too intrigued to maintain his irritation. “How…is it?”

“Dead,” Marwyn murmured, lustful. “But alive. A city built to fit millions, whose black stone towers swallow the light itself. And yet, Asshai has a population of a small town, and its residents only ever dwindle. No child laughs, no bird caws, no horse neighs. I learned much from that place, about life and death. Even met a Lhazareen godswife learning about shadows. Mirri Maz Duur was her name—we traded languages. She taught me of her Shepard and I taught her of the body. Now here I am: my menial task done and my roots dug deep.”

The Maester was passionate about his beliefs, and suspicious of the men that shared his title. Back when Oberyn had joined the Citadel, a youth of seventeen, Marwyn had been newly risen to archmaester and attained the permanent place he’d always desired. But he’d been too new to avoid getting sent away. Too impulsive to mask his lust.

“It’s the catacombs I want, princeling. The ones that don’t exist.”

Each archmaester had a black skeleton key that could access every room in the Citadel, as well as the top layer of the catacombs running under the Honeywine river. But Marwyn believed that multiple keys, used in tandem, opened doors even farther down. Ancient chambers carved into the earth and spelled to last a million years, greedily hiding the knowledge of the ages. Oberyn had been intrigued enough by the prospect to willingly help the man in his quest. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—he had few friends amongst his peers. The archmaesters guarded their keys so well only death would separated them.

Marwyn lusted after those hunks of metal and they all knew it. That’s why they’d conspired to send him to Essos to ‘map the world’ and bring back books for ‘cultural enrichment.’ They didn’t trust him any more than he trusted them.

Oberyn thought they were right not to.

A knock interrupted. Marwyn bid them entry.
The door swung open to reveal three cloaked idiots, their hoods down. Oberyn caught a glimpse of a novice hurrying away.

The boys looked as if they’d arrived to their execution. It was enough to make Oberyn smile. Sam was looking at each person in rapid succession, forehead beginning to sweat. Domeric pressed his lips together briefly and nudged Jon, mildly stating, “This doesn’t void our agreement.”

He got a venomous glare in response.

Oberyn pushed slowly to his full height, stepping away from the window. All three boys tracked him like they were deer, ready to flee. “Close the door,” he ordered softly, and Samwell scurried to obey, likely hoping to alleviate his anger.

But Oberyn was completely calm; this punishment was born from necessity, not emotion. He lazily loped forward, slowly slipping the rings off his right hand.

First, the emerald on his thumb.

Then, the two simple silver rings on his index.

Finally, the onyx on his smallest finger.

The boys tracked his every motion, tension building.

He paused briefly by Marwyn’s table, where the Mage was chewing his sourleaf, and let the rings drop with a small clatter of metal on wood. He kept his smile in place.

Jon stepped forward, his expression quickly turning challenging. Belligerent. “We weren’t caught— it was clean, we got away—”

Oberyn took three strides forward and slapped him across the face.

Jon’s head snapped to the side; he staggered back and collided with Samwell. The boys stumbled for a moment, Sam yelping as he tried to hold Jon’s weight. They slammed against the doorframe, the wood halting their decent.

Oberyn was already turning towards Domeric. The squire had just enough time to tense in preparation before Oberyn backhanded him. Like Jon, his head snapped to the side, and he stumbled to the left. Domeric was closer to the wall and managed to steady himself with one hand, clawing for purchase against the disorientation.

Oberyn knew exactly what the boys felt at the moment, their ears ringing and their faces burning. The world would be spinning for a few more second, leaving the room at a queer angle. Their cheeks would sting for the rest of the day, maybe tomorrow as well, especially for Domeric who had tensed in expectation.

Whenever he’d truly displeased her, his mother would make a point of taking her rings off, one by one, knowing he could do nothing but stand there and wait for the blow. Frankly, these idiots should be grateful it was his hand that dealt it, because his mother never held back. Being an expert in the whip had developed the muscles in her arm to a lethal degree, more than enough to bruise.

“This strike is so that every time my stupid son so much as breaths he remembers his mistakes. By the Mother Above, Oberyn, your arrogance will see you dead. Who will teach you logic when I am gone?”
Oberyn scanned them both, clucking his tongue. Jon seemed shell-shocked, while Domeric just gingerly touched his cheek. Samwell Tarly shook as if he were about to piss himself.

“This strike,” he murmured. “Is so my idiot squires remember that all actions will have consequences, either as small as a blow or a large as a blood feud. Whether or not it was ‘clean,’” he mocked. “Is inconsequential. If you let this become a habit, then one day you will find your enemies outweigh your friends.”

Domeric nodded, but Oberyn didn’t bother taking that as proof of acquiesce. *That* one would only ever do what he wanted. It was Jon he focused on, whose shoulders were tense as he pressed his lips tightly in anger. Oberyn pinched his chin and forced him to look up. Jon only resisted for a moment before doing so. His expression was still belligerent, but there was an undertone of hurt.

“Come now,” he tsked. “You must have anticipated this. Why, I’d even say I’m being generous, considering the measure of your disobedience. Just imagine what Lord Stark would have done.”

Jon’s expression fell, and he didn’t dispute the words. He licked his lips, slumping. “But—the lesson—I thought it was that you can’t change nature. That…no one can be who they are not. And then you left so there was a chance—and we didn’t implicate you…”

Oberyn tapped the boy’s chin with his thumb, once, twice—a gentle show of care. “I will not lie and say I did not foresee this outcome.” He shrugged. “But you both learned and failed to learn. You see, broody boy, there are things in this world much worse than Randyll Tarly. Sometimes, you have to witness it, swallow it, and continue on your way. Take care not to willfully interfere in a system, or you’ll get trapped in their web and your own goals will grow distant, if not *impossible*. You barely have a House—and yet you risked its downfall.”

Jon paled, swallowing hard. He sank his gaze, unable to meet Oberyn’s eyes.

Samwell was also looking down, eyes tearing, although he quickly wiped them on his sleeve. Guilt looked like an illness on him. *That one* knew well what Jon was risking, but he’d been desperate for his freedom and went along with it all the same. He’d never forget this, and no man would be more loyal to Jon Snow.

But was one man’s allegiance worth a lifetime of regret? Was one good act worth losing your head?

Oberyn had spend nearly a fourth of his life in Essos and witnessed more evil than these boys could conceive. He’d tried, at times, to save the weak and helpless—a slave girl, an abused child, an old man beaten by crooks. He’d even founded his own mercenary company for this *glorious* goal. But tragedy never ended, there was always someone to save, and he’d quickly grown disillusioned.

There was a reason the songs were riddled with tales of the hero’s noble sacrifices, be it losing all companions on his mad quest, or killing his own wife for a pretty sword. But they never spoke of the pain the hero carried, nor the broken man that remained after his great victory.

Saving the world was an idealistic goal, and he pitied those that dedicated their lives to it. Oberyn didn’t want that for himself, and he didn’t want it for Jon. The world only took and took until one had was nothing left to give.

Joy must be grasped with bloody claws, because no one would just hand it to you.

But Jon looked up, almost glaring his challenge, and asserted, “If we can help someone, we *should*.”

Knight and squire held each other’s gazes for a long moment. Then, wordlessly, Oberyn let him go and turned his attention to Samwell. The boy startled and flinched, raising his arms as if the attention
was a predecessor of a blow.

“Do you know what it means to be a lowborn novice?”

When Sam processed the words, he gingerly lowered his arms, flushing tomato-red.

“L-lowborn?” Sam questioned, as if the word were in another language. “I-I don’t understand,” he admitted, flushing.

Oberyn released a great sigh and loped back to the table, reclaiming his rings. “This is archmaester Marwyn.” He nodding to the man who was still crewing the sourleaf.

The boys greeted the maester on cue, Dom politely, Jon stiltedly, and Sam in awe. All three scanned the man, likely united in their conclusion that he looked nothing like a maester. Oberyn chuckled as he reaffixed his jewellery, absently kissing the onyx stone he’d stolen from Ellaria. It was the same shade as her eyes.

“If you plan to register as ‘Samwell Tarly’, boy,” Marwyn began, his chair groaning as he leaned forward. “Then you’d best be ready to cough up a thousand gold dragons.”

Sam’s jaw dropped, and Jon’s eyes grew huge.

“I was under the impression that lessons at the Citadel were free,” Domeric murmured.

“That they are,” Marwyn agreed. “But it’s an open secret that little highborn boys that don’t offer a generous donation never see their chains.”

The boys blanched, while Domeric grew thoughtful.

“But-but I—I don’t have…” Sam trailed off, and he seemed as if his world were falling. His pupils were blown huge as his eyes were growing wet.

“Let me teach you lordlings a bit about politics,” Marwyn began, smile mean. “When a family pays the fee, they’re really paying to get rid themselves of an unwanted heir. The archmaesters obligingly strip the boy of name and claim by ensuring a chain is forged… even if they have to overlook a lack of talent. The inept boys are never sent to the Great Houses, of course; they’re sent to the poor lesser lords that see them as a symbol of power, that are grateful to have them even if a few family members should die while in their incompetent care. But who really cares about the woes of lesser lords?”

“But that… horrible,” Sam breathed, his idealistic image of the Citadel taking its first hit. Jon was growing grim. Dom leaned back against the wall, gingerly moving his stinging jaw back and forth.

“And true,” Marwyn shrugged. “But here’s the tail side of the coin: If no money is offered because, say, a boy runs away—” Samwell flinched. “—then the archmaesters are even happier. The Citadel now has a convenient little protégé, young and malleable. A few whispers in the boy’s ear, a garnish of empty praises…and when their fathers die, the poisoned heir is usually more than willing to return home and claim what is his by law. But even if he initially doesn’t want to go back, the poor boy keeps failing his exams?” A sinister smirk. “And what should he do now, with the pressure rising, the work getting harder? Live a life as an eternal novice, little more than a pet servant? Suddenly his House seems like a golden dragon, and he’ll be ever so grateful to the kind archmaesters that cared for him.”

One of the reasons Marwyn was so hated by his peers was that he wasn’t afraid to reveal their dirty little secrets. Obreyn also thought he got a kick out of shattering illusions.
Samwell looked to be near tears, while Jon’s jaw was clenched tightly.

“Such a rare thing, a runaway—and usually of lesser lords, barely worth mentioning. But a Tarly? Oh, you’d be a little jewel in their crown.” And the tears fell, to Marwyn’s amusement. “The question, then, boy,” the Mage murmured, his smile all teeth. “Is if you’re here to be a maester, or just to lay in wait. It’s a vicious way to torment your father, I must say.” And he did sound genuinely admiring. “How can Lord Tarly ever rest, knowing all his carefully made plans could be undone the moment he dies?”

A moment of stillness as they absorbed the words.

Behind Samwell, half hidden, Jon… smirked. It was only for a heartbeat before he noticed Oberyn’s regard. Only for a heartbeat before it gave way to flushing shame.

Ah, broody boy, revenge is seductive, is it not?

Sam, eyes blown huge, burst into sobs. He rushed forward and nearly collided with the table, pleading. “N-no! That’s not why I…” he trailed off, blubbering. “I didn’t want to torment him!”

Jon cleared his throat, pointedly not meeting Oberyn gaze, and clamped his hand on Sam’s shoulder, part guilt, part reassurance. Focusing on Marwyn, he asked, “And if he chooses to play the lowborn?”

Marwyn focused his attention on Jon for the first time, pausing in his chewing and lingering for a heartbeat too long of a moment. That hint of interest was enough to raise Oberyn’s hackles, but the Mage’s attention returned to his prize.

The boy’s weeping faltered, looking up with wide eyes. Being a man who enjoyed watching cats catch mice, Marwyn’s next words were spoken with a particularly vicious delight.

“Lowborn Sammy will be treated like a servant at best and a slave at worst. You’ll scrub the privies; empty chamber pots; take dictations until your fingers bleed; copy a thousand old books in poor candle light, until you wonder when your eyes will fall out; line up last for the slop the kitchens serve, when you’re not the one doing the serving; and, on top of it all, be expected to attend the hours long lectures and get top scores in the thousands of tests and quizzes. When the day is done and you’re in your hard, cold cot, surrounded by hundreds of loud, stinking boys, you’ll weep for the food and clothes and luxuries you once had. Finally, if you don’t decide to come out as a Tarly in exchange for a loaf of fresh bread, they’ll let you take your exam. Of course, if you didn’t suck up sufficiently to your examinator, somehow, he’s likely to fail you purely out of malice.”

A dark smirk made Samwell grew so pallid he likely lost the energy to even cry. “If you do pass, they’ll let you pound a bit of metal into a crude little link and call yourself clever, and the process starts again. When you finally make maester—if you do—you’ll be so full of resentment and, paradoxically, loyalty to this accursed place that you’ll work to further its goals. You’ll delight in abusing the next generation and lording your knowledge over the ignorant, convinced that your little pieces of metal give you that right.” His grin was bordering on maniacal, his teeth stained red. “And so this brilliant monster feeds itself.”

The words trickled off into a sinister silence, disrupted slowly by Samwell’s increasingly loud, panicked breathing. Jon was totally white, having finally realized that changing someone’s life for the better wasn’t so easy as running away. If there was no plan in place, then things fell to ruin. His fingers tightened on Sam’s shoulder, as if holding the boy from floating away—or holding himself grounded. Domeric was as close to fascinated as he could be.
Marwyn spit out the chewed up sourleaf, only to peel off a fresh one and stuff it in his mouth. “You’ve fallen into a bit of luck, boy. I’m willing to help smooth your path, if you choose to be a maester. You’ll do what I want, and only what I want.”

Oberyn made his way back to the window, leaning his elbows back against the sill and waiting. He wanted to be on a ship by nightfall, and while there was still plenty of time before they had to leave, he was quickly growing bored with this. Samwell’s fate was already decided, and this game of cat and mouse was tedious.

“Why?” Jon forced out, when it was obvious Samwell was in no state to speak. He pinned Marwyn with cold, suspicion eyes. His hand was still on Sam’s shoulder, gripping so hard it would no doubt bruise. “You’re an archmaester—so stop speaking as if you’re different. What do you want in return for this…‘help’?”

The Viper’s lip curled into a proud smirk.

Marwyn didn’t deny the implication. “Me? A few books.” Marwyn clasped his huge hands on his belly, humming cheerfully as he tipped his head towards Oberyn, “The princeling was a sufficient enough helper, before he got himself expelled.”

All three boys turned to Oberyn, one intrigued and two startled. The prince released a weary sigh. “They find a few books in your room one time and they call you a thief.”

“Books that shouldn’t exist,” Marwyn said, cheerfully. “There are a lot of those, here. I need a quick mind to copy down the good parts, while I search for more. Simple enough, don’t you agree?” None of them did, Oberyn saw, this clever group of boys. “So again I ask, are you a maester or a lord?”

Samwell looked around, uncertain, before finally settling his gaze on Jon. The boys had a silent conversation, Jon shaking his head briefly.

Sam licked his lips, “If…If I help you, won’t I get expelled? That is, if I get caught? Like—like prince…” he trailed off, casting Oberyn a furtive, awkward glance.

“The princeling was only expelled after those dogs sent me to Essos. He got greedy.”

Very true, Oberyn acknowledged. He was a curious man, and those books were nothing if not entertaining. But that didn’t mean Marwyn would go out of his way to help Sam if he got caught. If the boy grew too bothersome, or the situation too volatile, Marwyn may decide finding a new helper was preferable. He didn’t say this—because the truth didn’t matter. The boy was already trapped.

The silence was oppressive as Sam considered. The boy licked his lips again, then looked up at Marwyn. “If I may ask, how many archmaesters are there?”

“Twenty-one.”

“I-I know that there are fifteen disciplines and—”

“Sixteen,” Marwyn and Oberyn corrected in unison, the prior snappish and the latter amused.

“Sixteen?” Sam inquired, momentarily distracted from his fear.

“Magic, boy,” Marwyn spat, livid as only he could be. “Valyrian Steel is magic. Or the ‘higher mysteries,’ to the weak of stomach. Just because these old dogs look down on it doesn’t mean it’s not real.”
Marwyn raised his chain, running his thick fingers down the metal until he found the three small Valyrian steel links. He hadn’t re-forged them himself, Oberyn knew; Marwyn had long complained how his blood was too ‘impure.’ Instead, any maester who mastered the ‘higher mysteries’ was given a pre-crafted one, collected from the time that interactions between the Citadel and the Valyrian Freehold were common. Interesting, how back then maesters had traveled to Valyria in doves, hungry for the knowledge they now denied existed.

Knowledge that the Mage was sure they’d squirreled away.

Jon shifted warily at Marwyn’s covetous tone and took a small step away, no doubt reminded of what he carried on his back. Domeric was looking the man up and down, brow raised, while Samwell was only growing more miserable.

Considering that magic was merely a child’s tale in Westeros, the poor boy probably thought Marwyn was insane—or dangerously deluded. Samwell was probably smarter than Oberyn had been. While Marywn’s poisons had saved his life countless times, the current Oberyn, as compared to that brash seventeen-year-old, would have thought twice about associating with him.

“C-Can I go to any archmaester for my exams? Or do different ones specialize in d-different subjects?” Sam rushed out, hopeful and terrified.

Jon shot him a perplexed look, while Oberyn smirked. Clever boy indeed.

Marwyn’s grin was vicious. “Specializations; archmaesters are a lazy bunch. Only half of us even bother teaching novices anymore—and yes, I am one of them. Silver is my trade of choice.”

Medicine—and poison. It’s why Marwyn had been his favourite, and another reason Oberyn had been so willing to help him.

“Oh.” Samwell looked absolutely miserable when he said, “Thank you for your offer, archmaester Marwyn… I accept.”

“Sam! If you get caught…” Jon was grim. “I know the lowborn path is…but others have managed it.”

His squire didn’t know enough about maesters.

Sam turned to him, smile wan. “If I want to be a maester, this is the only way. You see, you can’t become a maester unless you forge all fifteen—I-I mean, fifteen of the sixteen—links. If archmaester Marwyn decides to fail me—” The man in question showed his teeth, entertained. “—I’d be a novice forever; a Tarly forever.”

Left unsaid was that if Randyll ever found him, he’d be sent to the Wall—or worse. There was always the chance the boy would change his mind and pursue his claim, and his father wouldn’t rest until he was sure it was impossible.

Samwell had analyzed the situation well.

The Mage began to cackle, “Ah, clever, clever boy! And here I thought I’d have to fail you a time or two before you understood.”

A tactic he had, no doubt, perfected with many of his other helpers. Oberyn was probably one of the few people that had aided Marwyn purely to entertain himself.

Jon turned a glare on Marwyn, “This is coercion.”
Marwyn spat out the chewed up sourleaf, cackling. “That it is!”

After a few moments of futile, teeth gritting anger, Jon turned his accusation on Oberyn. The Viper could only shrug a shoulder.

The squire’s futile anger was slow to dissipate, and everyone left him to it. Sam took the opportunity to breath, while Domeric was still more interested in the pain in his jaw than their petty drama. Inevitably, Jon finally deflated, his long face grim and his shoulders sinking under the weight of responsibility. He’d never looked more like Eddard than in that moment. The poor boy probably hadn’t expected the escaping to be the easy part. Another lesson, one Oberyn never planned, but useful all the same: there was no perfect solution, just different challenges on a perpetually bumpy road.

“Sam,” Jon began, sombre. “I’m sorry.”

Sam took a deep breath and exhaled slowly in a sigh. Then he shook his head and forced a smile. “Don’t be,” he asserted, sounding more determined than Oberyn had thought him capable of. “I—I’m doing it, Jon. I will be a maester. I will. For myself—because it’s what I’ve always wanted. I-I know it won’t be easy, but this is my choice, and I don’t regret it. And—and,” he looked to Jon, lips shifting into a small, hesitant smile. “And if you’ll have me—I-I should like to be your maester. One day.” He cleared his throat, flushing. “I-I’ve been told that I’m clever and so, you see, when I get my chain and-and…” he trailed off when he realized Jon was watching him. Sam swallowed, flushing deeper and licking his lips.

Jon held out his hand, vowing, “I’d accept no other.” Sam’s eyes filled with tears. He took a shaking breath before he clasped it. They held tight, pact made.

*****

She’d done it for a selfish reason. She knew that now. Yes, she’d said it was because she wanted to make her cousin happy, to mend the bond between him and his own brother so as to give back, just a bit, for all that he’d done for her. To show him that of all the people in the world, Daenerys Targaryen loved him best.

But really, underneath all those ‘good’ reason, she’d wanted to prove to herself that ten years of separation couldn’t erase a bond of blood.

*If cousin Stannis and lord Renly could show her that they loved each other, then surely Viserys loved the sister he’d never met. That he thought of her, and wished they’d never been separated, as she often did.*

But in an effort to confirm a bond to a brother she’d never met, she’d destroyed the bonds to the only family she already had. A family that had loved and nurtured her and never made her feel different. She was the one that made herself feel alone.

*I hurt the man I call ‘cousin’…because I’m angry that I can’t call him father.* Every time she contemplated that humiliating idea, and thought, perhaps, that not being his true daughter wouldn’t really matter, she was soon proven wrong. Daenerys Targaryen dreamed of things to come, and gazed into a fire that loved her. Those facts told her she was different. Separated.

*Never really part of their family.*

There was only one person on this earth who shared her blood…and maybe her secrets, too. One person who could understand the terror of being other—the desperation to ignore it.
She’d been so preoccupied with her differences, that she’d let them poison her. (Cersei Lannister was the one to make her realize what her name really meant: that being a Targaryen could evoke such hatred in someone that they wanted only to hurt her. She couldn’t unlearn that truth.)

Her cousin had banished her tormentor, and she’d rewarded him by killing his child. She knew it was true, she knew: Myra hadn’t allowed her into her rooms in over a fortnight. She hadn’t seen Myra in over a fortnight! The longest ever, and each passing moment made her seem as if she were stranded on a tiny boat and drifting farther and farther from land. The rope that held her to the shore was cut, and she had no oars to row herself back. (She would die all alone in the middle of the sea.)

Terrified, she’d sat before the door, between two guards that couldn’t look at her (they knew the truth, too) and waited for hours to be let in, or even for Myra to emerge and at least tell her to leave, but it was as if nothing existed beyond that door.

*Myra hates me because I killed her child.*

Her cousin did, too. He didn’t leave his office, and she couldn’t bring herself to seek him out. He hadn’t even come to do her the kindness of punishing her. When she’d been wrong in the past, he’d always sat her down and explained her folly, then punished her for it. She’d always hated those times, now longed for them.

*He can’t look me in the eye. He hates me. I killed his child!*

Steffon hated her, too.

*Her nameday was two days ago, five days after that dinner, but no one had mentioned it except Tyene and Ser Justin. That had been more painful than if they’d all simply forgotten. But today it occurred to her that maybe...maybe Myra had just forgotten, and cousin Stannis too, and if Dany told her then—then she would let Dany in and tell her she didn’t hate her, that it was a mistake (that the babe still lived). Maybe Myra would let her in today. Maybe today....*

She’d arrived just in time to see the maid close the door in Steffon’s face. She hadn't seen him much since the dinner, because she’d been too sad and guilty to seek him out. She’d assumed he’d be in the care of Cressen and a maid (and Myra).

*But had Myra just... refused him entry as well? It’s my fault. She didn’t know how, but it must be, because she’s the one that ruined everything. If she hadn’t insisted on that dinner, then Myra wouldn’t have gotten so sad and—and lost the babe. (I wanted it to look like me. I wasn’t satisfied for it to just live.)*

“Steffon,” she whispered, horribly soft, painfully guilty. His head was bowed and his little hands clenched at his sides. At her words, he stiffened and wiped his face with his sleeve. She tried to reach out, maybe to hug him...

*He turned and shoved her, fear and anger and distress moistening his eyes. Dany fell back against the wall, gasping more in surprise than pain, and the guards shifted, unsure what to do. Ser Justin stepped forward, but hesitated, glancing between the two children helplessly.*

*“Go away!” he yelled, tears in his flushed cheeks. “This is your fault! I know it is, I know!”*

A deep hurt was gathering in her stomach, and she felt as if she couldn’t breath. Steffon had never looked at her like that before, so angry and resentful.

*“I-I’m sorry,” she whispered, and felt tears filling her own eyes.*
“I wish you’d been exiled, too!” he cried. Then he swallowed hard, wavered in place, and ran away.

She felt as if she couldn’t breath.

“He’s just scared, m’lady,” Tyene tried, trying to push Dany’s hair from her face as the little girl sobbed. Dany slapped her hand away, crunching into a tighter ball against the headboard. She hadn’t been able to move from there since she’s come back in tears, blubbering as she told Tyene what happened. “He doesn’t understand what’s happening, only that his mother was hurt, and that…his sibling was lost. Lord Stannis has also withdrawn and left you all alone,” she said, a hint of disapproval.

Dany jerked her head up, glaring. “Don’t say it like that! It—it’s my fault! He hates me.” A whisper, her little shoulder slumping. “I ruined everything and they all hate me.”

Tyene seemed genuinely taken aback. She shook her head, urgent. “M’lady no! No—that’s not…” she trailed off, frustrated. “They don’t hate you, m’lady. This is not your fault. Babes are lost everyday, and even the best maester cannot prevent it sometimes. It’s a painful reality for women, but only the gods can choose to give or take a life.”

Daenerys glared at her. There was nothing about the gods in all this! It was that dinner that hurt Myra, and Dany had organized it!

“Go away,” she demanded. “You don’t know anything.”

Tyene ignored her and tried to draw closer. Daenerys pushed away. “I said leave! I’m ordering you!”

She buried her face in her arms, refusing to feel guilty. (Tyene was only being nice to her because she was a maid—she had to be nice. But Dany knew the truth—everyone knew what she’d done, they knew it was her fault.) But even if Tyene believed her own words, it was only because she didn’t know how that Dany had only planned that dinner for selfish reasons.

Even Tyene’s gods would blame her then.

Before Tyene could rise, there was a knock on the door. For a second, Dany was totally still, and then she sprang into motion, rushing to the portal.

Maybe—!

But it was only Ser Davos, his hand still raised. He startled at how suddenly she’d jerked open the door, and then frowned sadly when he took in her disheveled hair and tear stained cheeks. Dany slumped, too disappointed to even whip her face.

Then a thought occurred to her and she perked up, hopeful, “Has…my cousin summoned me? Or—or Myra?”

Davos’s pity was all the answer she needed, and she turned away. “I’m sorry, my lady.”

She shook her head. “I’m not in good humour, Ser, so if you could return another time…”

She didn’t see his expression, staring down at her slippers, but his voice was soft—and grateful? “A gift arrived today, my lady, from your betrothed.” He cleared his throat, a guilty little sound. “For your nameday.”
She slowly lifted her head, and she didn’t know what expression was on her face because Ser Davos only smiled sadly and shifted. “I will wait out here, if it please you, while you…compose yourself?” he asked gently.

Dany flushed, suddenly embarrassed but her state. She nodded, a motion made jerky by the sudden beating of her heart. _Jon sent me a present?_

Was it horrible of her to feel happy?

Ser Davos smoothly stepped back, smiling through his beard, and his eyes twinkled with a warm merriment that told her that ‘Yes, it’s okay.’ She smiled, a bit tremulously, then quickly shut the door.

She whipped around, about to tell Tyene to get the brush, when she remembered what she’d said.

She met her friend’s eyes worriedly, but Tyene only chuckled. “Come then m’lady, let’s clean you up.” She herded Dany to seat at the vanity and brushed her cheeks with a wet cloth. “By the way, I’ve decided that today’s dinner will heavily feature artichokes.”

Dany slumped—Tyene knew she _hated_ artichokes—but didn’t protest.

When she was presentable, she left the room and took Ser Davos’s arm, still guilty for being excited. Tyene and Ser Justin trailed behind, murmuring between themselves. The two of them were close friends, and Tyene often lingered outside her rooms so she could speak with the knight.

Then they exited the main keep and made their way though the gardens, and when Dany realized they were headed to the aviary, her heart tripled in rhythm.

There was a man bearing a Tyrell sigil on his breast—except instead of one golden rose, his had two—and her first thought was that he looked like Loras. But he was taller and broader, and, when he greeted them with a lopsided smile, she thought he seemed much nicer.

“My lady Daenerys,” he took her hand and bowed over it, and Dany didn’t deny that her cheeks flushed. “Ser Garlan Tyrell, at your service.”

“Ser Garlan,” she murmured, swallowing. “I’ve heard much of you from your brother. What brings you to King’s Landing, my lord?”

He smiled, warm. “A labour of love, my lady, to bring a fair maiden joy. Your very own betrothed tasked my brother Willas with this duty, knowing that there is no one better to fulfill such a request. When the time was nigh, my cunning grandmother the Lady Olenna thought it was a good opportunity to see how Loras was faring, and thus entrusted the mission onto me.”

Well, she thought, amused, while he was nicer than Loras, he still spoke in the same way. But it didn’t annoy her this time, for he seemed genuinely warm and spoke as if he was aware of the humour.

A little bit of her sadness untwisted.

Ser Davos gruffly cleared his throat. “The present, ser?”

“Ah, yes!” Garlan swept out an arm and motioned her to the doors of the aviary, and the attended opened them on cue. The second Tyrell son led the way in, and Dany was immediately surrounded by the clamour of dozens of prized hunting birds and the smell of feathers and musk. From elaborate cages, sleek falcons and hawks and even a couple of eagles kept only for show stared back at her. Attendants were carefully feeding the birds and tending to their needs.
Garlan led her down the rows and to the left, to an empty area beside the royal family’s private birds. Or at least, it *used* to be empty, but in one of the wrote iron cages reserved for the Master of Ships, a beautiful blue hawk was perched, pecking at its own breast.

Aware of the sudden attention, the bird looked up and stared up at her with curious black eyes. Its feathers were sky blue with spots of black, lines of white, and on its back from its neck to tail was a large maroon spot, darker than the brown feathers on its belly. It cocked its head and gave a screeching cry from a beak that was gold at its base, then white and blue before ending in a black tip. Its feet were a deep gold tipped with black claws.

It was so beautiful, and Dany felt as if she would cry.

She approached the cage carefully, afraid of spooking it, and swept her eyes over every inch of feather. As if pleased by the admiration, the hawk fluttered its wings.

“She’s an adolescent female blue hawk, and the red colouring on her back is unique to her mother. Willas was pleased that it carried into her offspring, and Jon Snow specifically asked for one of her eggs to be trained for you. Here,” he held out a letter, the wax pointedly intact, “I’m sure he explained it better.”

Dany’s hand shook when she took it, almost not wanting to look away from the bird—*her bird*—long enough to read it. She felt so warm—after days of a chill cold that not even fire could fix.

*Dear Dany,*

*I recalled that you wanted to take up hawking, and I knew as soon as I saw the breeding pair that one of the chicks should be yours. I hope she gets her mother’s unique coloring, a downy red back, but I can’t be sure since she was only a tiny thing when I chose her. Her adult feathers not yet grown, but she was feisty and willful, refusing to allow her siblings to bully her, so I knew that she’d grow into a glorious creature. A fitting companion for a Targaryen princess.*

*I admit that I didn’t ask lord Stannis’s for permission, since I worried he’d forbid it as he did to you, but I can assure you both that lord Willas is an expert breeder. His birds are prized for both their viciousness towards their prey, and their sweetness towards their owners. All the hawk will need is time to acquaint itself with you, and then it will be the very best companion any highborn girl could ask for.*

*I hope to finally be in Dorne by the time this letter reaches you. I’m…excited to know what you think. And maybe a bit anxious.*

*I hope she pleases you, Dany.*

*Love,*

*Jon.*

Daenerys didn’t even try to prevent the tears, sobbing as she held the letter close, and felt Tyene and Ser Davos drawing closer to hide her vulnerability from the viewers. She didn’t care—she was so happy that feigning calm would only be an insult to Jon’s efforts.

*I love you, too.*

What a fool she’d been. Hadn’t she learned years ago that being sad solved nothing? That if something wasn’t working, you looked for another way?
Dany had work to do.

The next day she gathered her courage, showed up at Steffon’s door and bullied him into letting her in. Hands on her hips, she declared that she was going to fix everything, and demanded he apologize for shoving her because it had hurt. He was resistant for a while, petulant and angry, but eventually he calmed enough to stop yelling at her to go away.

She hid her painful relief behind a determined glare.

Steffon didn’t apologize, but he did let her drag him to the aviary and show off her new present. His eyes were wide when the attendant helped them hold the bird on a leather-gloved arm. Dany had named her Prumia, after the High Valyrian word of ‘heart.’

That’s when Dany came up with her plan. She needed to go to her cousin and get his permission—she needed to convince him to let her keep Pru, and let her learn to hawk. (She needed to tell him she was sorry. She hadn’t said sorry, and that was important.)

So she marched to his office, head held high, and raised her hand to knock.

She couldn’t bring herself to do it. The fear swamped her, bringing tears to her eyes, and she’d only stood there before turning to leave. Tomorrow, she decided. I’ll do it tomorrow.

The next six days passed in the same pattern, her time split between Steffon, Myra’s door, and trying to convince herself to knock.

Too terrified of being dismissed.

A few times, she met the other small council members, going to and from, and a couple of times met eyes with Renly Baratheon. She’d glared and turned away both times, convinced that he was as much at fault as she was. If he wasn’t such a mean person, none of this would have happened.

She’d been so wrong: he only pretended to be nice. He was really good at it.

On the seventh day, Daenerys stood before the door, heart in her throat, and hand raised.


*****

“Starfall,” he nearly choked, embarrassing himself. “But, I thought…”

“Only for three days,” Oberyn shrugged. “It would have been more, had you idiots not tampered in Tarly matters. As it stands, if I stall any further Doran will rip off essential parts of me, and Ellaria won’t love me nearly so well after that.”

Jon shifted, suddenly struck mute with anxiety. He stared up at Oberyn, eyes wide, and the prince frowned.

“What’s that look? You don’t want to? Come now, broody boy, this is why you came with me!”

“There were other reasons!” he protested, scowling.

Oberyn rolled his eyes. “So you tell yourself.”
Jon swallowed, unable to describe the pit of dread that took residence in his gut. He stared out at the calm cerulean waters of the Summer Sea, feeling the briny breeze playing in his hair, hearing the waves parting around the ship and the sailors moving around the main deck. In the distance, he could see a hint of land.

Before House Nymorous Martell conquered Dorne, the lords of Starfall were known as the Kings of the Torrentine. According to legend, ten thousand years ago during the dawn of days, the founder of House Dayne had followed a falling star to this location and built his castle upon it. The star was of such beauty that the Daynes fashioned it into a sword, named it Dawn, and dubbed its wielder The Sword of the Morning. The magnificent blade shone with a moonlit luminance at odds with the darkness of Valyrian Steel, but equally as sharp and strong. Contrary to other ancestral swords, Dawn wasn’t passed from father to heir, but rather wielded by the greatest knight in the family.

The last Sword of the Morning had been Ser Arthur Dayne, a kingsguard loyal to Rhaegar Targaryen. Lord Eddard Stark had killed him during his quest to save his sister Lyanna, who’d been kidnapped by the prince and held captive by his men. Ned had then returned the sword to House Dayne, left with an infant boy, and a short time later the Lady Ashara Dayne had thrown herself off Palestone Sword. Her body had never been found.

Jon listened with a detached sort of sadness as Oberyn reiterated history. Despite being a part of the tale, and personally knowing one of the main characters, he couldn’t help but feel like it happened in another life. That it existed in the pages of some tragic epic, rather than something that had really occurred only eleven years past.

‘What did she look like?’ was one of the questions he could never bring himself ask, second only to, ‘What was she like?’

He’d know soon enough, he supposed, watching the castle get larger as their ship approached the docks.

From afar, Starfall was a shining palace with tall white towers, arching bridges, and stained glass windows reflecting the sun into a million colors. Unlike the bright white of Moat Cailin, Starfall was built with ivory sandstone, making it seem both more welcoming and more innocent. It was beautiful, with its pointed domes and thatched triangular rooftops. Under the sun, it shone like a jewel itself, but Jon knew those beautiful towers had seen death and destruction, despite how unsoiled and pure they seemed. Jon was certain his heart would either shrivel or jump out of his chest, depending on what the Daynes told him. He looked up at the towers, wondering which one was the Palestone Sword.

While there was no way to tell, but he did make note of the fluttering white sheets that hung from the windows and bridges, frowning as he wondered at their significance. He looked up at Oberyn to find he was staring the same thing, a grimness on his face.

“What does it mean?” Domeric asked, coming up to stand beside them, to Oberyn’s left, where the prince was leaning against the rail. He nodded at the sheets.

“Final Entombment rites,” Oberyn sighed, straitening. “We’re a desert people, so burying, burning, or funerals at sea are near impossible. Sandstorms would uncover the body; we don’t have trees to spare; and most of Dorne is landlocked. While Starfall is near the river, lord Aedion’s mother, the lady Anaris, hails from House Qorgyle of Sandstone. It’s deep in the deserts to the east and keeps to the old way, so she would insist on having a Light Funeral.” Oberyn sighed.

“When death strikes, the body is carefully prepared by the silent sisters, and a vigil is held for any mourners, lasting seven days to give the soul time to greet each face of god. Then, the corpse is taken
to a Tower of Light, deeper into the desert guarded only by a single warrior-priest. The towers are
tall, narrow structures, with an open room at the top surrounded by seven pillars that hold up the
roof. The body is left there so that the flesh can be picked clean by vultures, and the bones bleached
by the sun. After seven months, the remains are retrieved and entombed in the family catacombs.
During the last month, which honors the Stranger, the house and the family dress in white, so that
their bodies may absorb the light and act as guides to the underworld.”

Jon’s mood darkened. Perfect, he was intruding on an important ceremony, inserting himself into
their mourning so as to fulfill his personal desires. One of the Daynes had died, someone who could
—could share his blood. But all he could feel was a distant sympathy, and that made him almost
wretched.

“How you know who it was?” Jon asked him, quiet.

Oberyn shook his head. “I’ve not kept up with the news.”

“Maybe—we should go. I’m in Dorne now, there will be other chances—”

“I sent word at Old Town that we’d come. Turning around would only be insulting. Besides, I was a
frequent visitor in my youth, and I have my own respects to pay.”

Jon flushed, not having considered that.

They disembarked and made their way to the Main Gate with little fanfare, being accompanied only
by a group of three knights, all of whom had bowed to Oberyn with a genuine respect Jon hadn’t
witnessed in any House thus far. That, more that anything else, made him realize that he was in
Dorne, squire to their prince. He was the farthest he’d ever been from the North, in a kingdom that
was the exact opposite of his home in every way. Instead of a chill in the air and the scent of pine,
animals, and rain, he was surrounded by humid heat, and his nose twitched at the smell of tropical
flowers, sea, and sand. The people were dressed in bright colors, and the docks busy with trade and
travel.

_I was born here. I was born in this kingdom…maybe in this very castle._ And yet, at the moment he
longed for Winterfell, feeling horribly homesick like never before. He wanted to spar with Robb,
fight with Theon, listen to Sansa prattle about songs, play with little Arya, and watch baby Bran
waddle about. He wanted to sit beside his father under the weirdwood and just listen to the forest and
the sound of Ned Stark sharpening Ice.

He wondering if his impulsive act to follow a prince would be worth whatever lurked behind that
open castle gate. Wondered if he should have just stayed at home, dreaming of his mother instead of
seeking the truth.

But it was two years too late for regret. They passed beyond the Main Gate, into a courtyard buzzing
with guards and servants, all of whom were either fully dressed in shades of white, or had donned
some white trappings over their silver armor. They stood at sigil, and at the front of the row, before
the main keep, was the family: Two children, the girl a few years older than the boy at her right, a
young man that stood a little apart from them, and in between a matron standing tall just in front of
the others.

The girl, who must be the lady Allyria Dayne, younger sister to Aedion, Arthur, and Ashara, was
who Jon focused on first. She was about his age, maybe a little older, with waist-length black hair
braided in a crown; a long, pretty face; and storm cloud blue eyes. She wore an ivory silk shift that
exposed her shoulders, thin pants underneath her sheer skirt, and a row of round luminescent gems
around her neck. Jon knew from the moment he met her gaze—guilt and sorrow—that she knew
something. She returned his regard and offered a pained, shamed smile.

The boy to her right, standing just a bit behind her as if hiding, must be lord Edric Dayne, son to the current head of the house. Edric was a few years Jon’s junior, seven or eight years at most, and so slim he looked fragile. His straight ash blond hair and blue-violet eyes watched them with a shy, hesitant curiosity, and he bowed quickly when Oberyn’s gaze fell on him. He wore an ivory tunic and pants set, plain but for their fine material.

Jon hoped the man in their party would be lord Aedion, but as they drew closer it became apparent that he wasn’t related to the Daynes. He was about Theon’s age, just shy of twenty, slight, handsome, with red-gold hair and brown eyes. On his pale tunic was a sigil bearing a purple lightning bolt before a field of white stars. Jon didn’t recognize it, but Oberyn’s brow raised when he took the man in.

Finally was lady Anaris herself, who, despite standing within the group, seemed to be removed somehow from the rest. She was a tall, proud woman of severe black hair and swarthy skin, a couple decades older than his father, and dressed severely in white. Her icy violet eyes were filled with polite welcome, but there was a heaviness about her that made his stomach drop. The lines around her eyes and face were stretched tight.

Oberyn nodded his head to her, face set and features serious. “My lady. On behalf of House Nymeros Martell of Sunspear, I offer my condolences for your loss.” Jon lowered his gaze, mute; Oberyn had told him about every family member, and since young Edric’s mother had perished years ago due to poor health, it was obvious whom they were mourning. Starfall had lost its lord.

Anaris nodded in acknowledgment, formal and cool. “Thank you, your highness. Welcome to Starfall, and may your comings and goings be in peace.”

Oberyn smiled, tinged with sorrow, “A little chaos can be good for a man, I’ve always found. Lord Aedion and I shared that belief, which you no doubt remember from how often you were forced to scold us in our youth. He was a good man, my lady. An even better friend.”

Anaris’s eyes shone with a mother’s sorrow, Allyria’s lip began to tremble, and Edric blinked rapidly and hunched his shoulders. Jon hadn’t know Aedion Dayne, nor heard his name before this day, but Oberyn’s genuine regret and the family’s obvious sorrow touched him. His chest ached for their loss.

“Six months ago he was thrown form his horse while on one of his rides. He broke his neck in the fall,” Anaris revealed, regaining her composure enough so the words came out hard. Six months, Jon noted, feeling relief that it was early in the seventh, so they weren’t intruding during a particularly crucial time. Anaris’s chilly smile sharply contrasted the humid heat. “An unfortunate accident, so they tell me.”

“I see.” Oberyn’s eyes sharpened, and Jon and Domerick both caught onto the inflection, sharing a look between them.

Anaris turned to the others, motioning elegantly with her hand. “My daughter, the lady Allyria, and my grandson, Edric, Lord of Starfall.” She nodded to them. “Greet the prince.”

“Welcome, your highness, and may your comings and goings be in peace,” the children intoned, curtsying and bowing on cue. Oberyn smiled, face softening as it always did around youths.

Anaris motioned to the young man. “And I believe you two have already met, your highness. Lord Beric Dondarrion of Blackhaven, Allyria’s betrothed. Edric serves as his page, and lord Beric was gracious enough to escort my grandson home so that he may participate in Aedion’s Final
Entombment.”

“There is nothing so important as honoring one’s family, my lady,” lord Beric murmured, seemingly sincere.

Allyria smiled at that, peeking up at the lord fondly before flitting away when he turned his regard to her.

Beric turned and offered Oberyn a stilted nod. “Prince Oberyn. The last time we met was at… the Tourney of Harrenhal, I believe.” He cleared his throat.

“Lightning lord.” Oberyn’s grin was razor sharp as he inclined his head. Suddenly, Jon wondered what side of the Rebellion lord Beric had stood on. But then, considering he was a Marsh lord of the Stormlands, odds were good that he’d supported Robert Baratheon.

The prince motioned to Jon and Domeric, watching the family carefully as he did so. “My squires, Jon Snow, son of Eddard Stark of Winterfell, and Domeric Bolton, heir to the Dreadfort. A very northern lot, these two, but Great Dorne has a way of crawling into one’s blood.”

Jon shifted, uncomfortable, as the family glossed over Domeric and focused on him. Allyria looked away, lips pulling downward, while Edric stared with open-eyed interest. But it was Anaris, with her frosting gaze that chilled the sweat beading on the back of his neck. For a long second they were quiet, with only lord Beric blinking blankly, before Anaris simply murmured, “Welcome.”

“My condolences for you loss, my lord, my ladies,” Jon said, echoed by Domeric a moment later. Dom’s tone didn’t have any of the hesitation in Jon’s.

She turned away and held out her hand, palm down, and Oberyn obligingly broke away to stand beside her, lifting his arms so she could rest her hand upon his wrist. She led them inside without another word, with Jon and Domeric trailing at the rear, and Jon couldn’t help but tense further every time Edric shot looks over his shoulder. Allyria stared straight, but the line of her spine was tense beneath her clothes. Anaris led them as far as a grand staircase in the main hall, and then they parted after she instructed the servants to show them to their rooms, and prepare baths and appropriate clothing.

While he dressed in a simple ivory tunic and pants, preparing to go down to dine with the family as he had in dozens of Houses in the past two years, Jon tried to be appropriately solemn. He understood that his parentage was the least of their concerns right now, that honestly it wasn’t that important regardless of the current situation, but he couldn’t help feeling a sense of disappointment. Surely if he were lady Ashara’s… bastard, then one of them would have said something before leaving. Even if only to make it clear that he had no business thinking that their shared blood entitled him to anything. But there had been nothing, and no one had sought him out or summoned him in the interim, nor had any of the servants given him a second glance.

But if I’m nothing to them…why does the room feel so heavy when they look at me?

Conversation at dinner that night was mainly between Oberyn and Anaris, speaking of the current news he may have missed, and sharing the occasional story of his youth at Starfall, when he, his mother, and his sister had visited while he’d been just older than Jon was now. Oberyn kept the topic far away from princess Elia, and had yet to make a mention of Ashara.

Jon focused on his plate, pushing around the spicy mango chicken with a side of greens, and took a small sip of the watered down Dornish wine. It wasn’t bad, but it was a bit too bitter for his tastes. At his side, Domeric was openly focusing his attention on Edric Dayne, who was inconspicuous
shooting looks Jon’s way, but ducking his head whenever their eyes actually met. It was making him self-conscious and only increasing both his confusion and frustration.

“And, of course,” Anaris was saying, taking precise bites. “There’s the betrothal between Allyria and lord Beric.”

Obeyrn turned his attention to Allyria, smile genuine and rueful. “I have been remiss, my lady. Had it not been for my travels keeping me away, I would have known to prepare a betrothal gift. Even though I’m sure my brother has already sent one on behalf of our House.”

The room seemed to still for an instant, enough for Oberyn’s eyes to narrow and Jon to finally look up, until Anaris grasped her glass and took a generous sip. “Prince Doran was generous indeed.”

Allyria’s smile was weak. “I’ve only been betrothed five months, your highness. I doubt the news has yet spread throughout Dorne, let alone the other kingdoms.”

Obeyrn’s gaze sharpened, and Jon also took note of how close the dates were between Lord Aedion’s fall and Allyria’s engagement. Then there was Anaris’s allusions about the accident. Was something happening at Starfall?

“Still,” Oberyn smiled after a second. “You must allow me to escort you to the bazaar and buy you a gift befitting your beauty.”

Allyria blushed faintly at the compliment, but instead of politely refusing, as a northern woman would have, or staring helplessly like girls in the crownlands, or coquettishly demurring like a Reach lady, this Dornish miss smiled with genuine pleasure. “Thank you, prince Oberyn, I would love that. I know your stay is short, so perhaps tomorrow after luncheon?”

No one batted an eye at her guileless acceptance except lord Beric, who seemed faintly taken aback. Jon took note of this difference between Dorne and the rest of the kingdoms. He supposed in a culture that allowed the first child to succeed, regardless gender, females would be more open and assured about what they wanted, not needing subterfuge or to veil their desires. Perhaps he would be more surprised had he not exchanged letters with Daenerys these two years, firsthand experiencing a girl comfortable telling him exactly what she wanted.

It suited him fine, truthfully. He’d rather not have to guess at her mind and live in confusion about her intentions, like he had after his interactions with Margaery Tyrell.

Dany should have gotten her present by now, he recalled. It had significantly depleted his winnings from the Tourney, but Jon didn’t regent it at all. Besides, it was her bow that had brought him victory, and he’d known she wanted to hawk since that long ago letter. I hope she liked it…

She would tell him all about it as soon as they reach Sunspear. He smiled to himself, then returned his attention to the conversation.

Oberyn was grinning, a warm twinkle in his eye. “…I beg you be kind to my purse.”

Allyria allowed a tiny smirk, “I shall ask the shopkeepers to only show me items on par with my beauty, prince Oberyn.”

Oberyn threw his head back and roared with laughter, and Jon couldn’t prevent a surprised chuckle. Anaris smiled into her cup, Edric grinned, and Domeric mimicked it. After overcoming some hesitance at being confronted with how different his fiancee was to women he was use to, lord Beric’s expression softened fondly, and he smiled. “I should like to come along as well, my lady, if it please you. I’ve been remiss as well, not having spent much time in the homeland of my betrothed.”
Jon decided Beric Dondarrion was a good man.

Allyria’s glance at him was much shyer, but her smile was genuine. She nodded. “It would please me, my lord.”

The rest of the dinner went by uneventfully, and Jon began to think that the rumors about Ashara Dayne being his mother were only that—rumors. He felt a strange mix of melancholy and relief. Maybe…maybe it was better to not know. When he’d dreamed of his mother, she had always been abstract, and he’d never considered her life and complications.

There had to be a good reason his father kept silent, and Jon should just accept it. Traveling this continent had shown him how blessed he’d been at Winterfell, even though he sometime felt like an outsider. Maybe it was better to appreciate what one had, instead of always wanting more.

Sometimes wishes didn’t turn out as envisioned.

After dinner, Oberyn made a point of asking to visit the gardens, and they all made their way there. Jon admired and gawked at the strange trees with long leaves and hard brown spheres within; at the tropical flowers in purple and orange and red, their perfume almost cloying; at the clamorous birds and bejeweled insects flying about. White rose bushes as tall as his body framed the path, and Jon slowly noticed how Oberyn kept him by his side, with Lady Anaris on his other arm, and slowed their gait until the others were far in the distance.

Too late, Jon realized why.

“My squire has some questions, my lady, which have drawn him to this beautiful land of ours. But he’s playing the shy sort today, and we have no time to stall.” He placed his hand upon Jon’s head, tangling his fingers in the strands. “Was lady Ashara his mother?”

Jon’s heart nearly stopped, and then doubled in rhythm. He stared down at the cobblestone path, suddenly plagued with a familiar resentment mixed with a humiliating gratitude. He was thankful the question was out, yet wished he could take it back. You’re a coward, Jon Snow. What exactly are you afraid of?

…That his mother hadn’t wanted him enough to live. (That he’d been part of the reason she hadn’t.)

The pause seemed to last an eternity. When she finally spoke, it was as if the words were torn from her.

“Ashara always did whatever she wanted.” A deep undertone of anger, barely suppressed. “She would not be restrained, much as it would have spared us all heartache, and gallivanted all over these kingdoms chasing after… your father.” Jon jerked his head up, his inhale so sharp it was a gasp. She didn’t look at him—she had done so only once, when greeting them—and her profile was hard as she looked in the direction of her family. “She decided she wanted a child, regardless of practicality or reason, and damn the rest of us to the Seven Hells.” Jon jerked his head up, his inhale so sharp it was a gasp. She didn’t look at him—she had done so only once, when greeting them—and her profile was hard as she looked in the direction of her family. “She decided she wanted a child, regardless of practicality or reason, and damn the rest of us to the Seven Hells.” He flinched. In the distance, Lady Allyria glanced back, but she was too far for him to tell her expression. His eyes burned. “You were nursed alongside my own daughter, and when lord Stark came offering Dawn, my son’s blood on his hands, I gave you to him. Ashara was… unfit.”

Jon felt as if his heart were being crushed. He gasped in a quivering breath, and the world grew blurry around the edges. Oberyn’s fingers tensed, pressing down softly.

“Come to me tomorrow if you have any interest in the details. It’s not a pleasant story.” Lady Anaris looked down at him, and for an instant he glimpsed pity, before it was quickly overshadowed by
resentment. “I will not bar you from my home, nor from my blood, but grandson or not, you will address me as ‘my lady.’”

She pulled away, and Jon watched her until she took a sharp turn and disappeared in the direction of the keep.

He should have stayed home.

*****

If Stannis had one true regret, it was stopping his communications with Eddard, and thus significantly cutting down his workload.

He sat in his office, the day early yet, and ground his teeth as he scanned through his documents, seeking something to do. Shipping agreements: signed. Work orders: written and rewritten. Royal navy reports: reviewed—thrice. Correspondents with the Iron Bank: finished. Moat Cailin: all but completed. Dragonstone: in the castellan’s too dutiful hands.

And my family…he pushed the thought away with the same ruthlessness he’d once banished starvation.

Even his stress about Tobho Mott had lessened, although the solution only evoked different turmoil. Stannis was now knowingly, although indirectly, selling to Astapor. He’d avoided the Slave Cities for over two years, going so far as to stipulate to his other buyers that selling to the slavers would void their contracts. He’d kept to his word three times already and brutally severed his relationship with two Pentoshi merchants and one Norvosi. Then, upon Ser Davos’s recommendation, he’d forged new contracts with their closest competitors. The deals with Astapor ceased thereafter—or at least, the sellers had grown exceedingly careful about it.

The act had cut into his revenue, but Stannis was not a man to let greed overcome his principles.

But he’d learned this past month that other things could. Was it a desire for something to do? Was it the necessity of a new focus, a new project, something to grow and shape? Or perhaps he’d just become so sickened of things not going right, of weathering multiple losses to this cruel world, that in a moment of weakness he’d stopped trying to be better.

I have to make amends. I have to…

He’d dedicated his total focus on paying off that damned debt, on schedule, and purging its shadow from his family. The money he made would be for his wife and children, he’d sworn, not for shouldering Robert’s failures. Frankly, Stannis was tired of taking on responsibilities that should have belonged to the king.

All my life I’ve tried, all my life I’ve been on the straight path, and it led to nothing but heartache! To the Seven Hells with them all!

When one of his agents returned from Volantis days after the…dinner, with news of a new merchant selling to Astapor, for triple the price…Stannis had paused. The popularity of his metal amongst mercenary companies (and, he suspected, thieves) was on the rise, because it increased their defence without significantly rising the threat of dehydration. Due to this, more mercenaries were able to engage in long battles despite the hot climates of Essos. This had correspondingly decreased the purchase of expensive Unsullied.

The slave soldiers used spears as their main weapon and wore only light quilted tunics with a round shield for defence. They were weak to cavalries and armored infantry, and could thus be felled by a
good longsword in close combat. The problem was the Unsullied had deadly aim and speed, which often meant they could quickly get past a man’s guard and deliver a deadly blow to unarmored bodies long before their opponent could make use of their blade. But his metal had ensured that the mercenaries (and thieves) increased their defence without significantly hampering their speed, allowing them to more safely get close to the slave soldiers and target their weak areas: their exposed hand and thighs. Once they were crippled or disarmed, their formation quickly broke and they were much easier to defeat.

If the Unsullied ever came to Westeros, Stannis had speculated, they’d be a challenging but ultimately beatable group for a well-prepared army. He’d ordered his men all heavily armored and wielding longswords.

The more unsavory mercenaries and crooks had taken advantage of this new reality. Powerful men traveling across Essos were in more danger than ever, as their slave soldiers had begun falling in increasing numbers. In response, coin that had previously bought slaves was now used to buy a collection of mercenaries.

In response to gradual change, the ‘Good Masters’ of Astapor were growing desperate to increase their slaves’ defensive capabilities. A difficult task, considering most armor was too heavy and restricting when paired with the Unsullied’s fighting style. When his agent relayed all of this to him, Stannis had seen an opportunity. He’d felt odd, exhausted, and suddenly…spiteful.

The constant stress of money, the need to live frugally…shouldering Robert’s failures, as he’d always done, and getting only pain in return!

Stannis had sent his man back with a contract. He’d allow the merchant to continue his business, on the condition that Stannis get a third of his revenue and the man kept quiet about it. He’d ignored his agent’s unease, which reflected his own, made him a captain, and gave him a ship and loyal crew. He’d deliver the metal to Volantis, extract the payment, and return with no one realizing that merchant paid double. The Lord of Dragonstone had ensured the man knew exactly what would happen to him if he shared his task with anyone.

Ever.

Then, he’d shared the news with his advisers.

“My lord, I—that is, perhaps we should—should…” Cressen floundered, mouth opening and closing as he tried to find the words. Rarely had Stannis seen the man so aghast. Disapproval dripped from the maester, something Stannis was not used to from his staunchest supporter. He ground his teeth against the sudden, childish, shame.

I am right in this. I am.

Ser Davos wasn’t as hesitant, his gaze clear and resolute. But then, the former smuggler had little trouble speaking his mind in the rare instances he disagreed with his lord, regardless how hesitant the man sometimes was for smaller matters. Stannis valued that honesty, assured as he was of Davos’s boundless loyalty, although at times he loathed to hear it. This was one such instance.

“My lord Stannis, forgive me for my bluntness, but this isn’t the way. There are too many risks involved. I ask you to consider another solution. Slavers,” he spat out, “are the lowest form of humanity.”

Stannis leaned back, clenching his fist as he stared hard at them. He shoved the words away.
Cressen took the words as cue, jumping in immediately. “My lord, send someone to the Iron Bank, negotiate a new repayment schedule. It will take longer, yes, but wouldn’t it ease Tobho Mott’s burden just the same? Such a radical solution is—”

“Were you not the one to plan this schedule, maester?” Stannis ground out, cutting him off. He leaning forward to pin them both with an icy stare. “You argued that we should pay as soon as possible, before the Essosi smiths had enough time to discover the secret. ‘Why would the Essosi purchase from us then?’ is what you asked. Any day now they will uncover it, and our buyers will dwindle. Or do you propose we extend this debt forever and get buried in interest?”

The men shared a look, acknowledge the point.

“Tell me, Davos,” Stannis continued ruthlessly. “Has there been word from the Driftwind and its accompaniment? We’ve lost two ships in six months, the first was picked clean by pirates, and then this one vanished without a trace. Both were accompanied by war galleys, the first four and the second six, and yet…” he pointedly trailed off. “Remind me, how many moons worth of work did Mott lose?”

Silence, but Stannis had not intended the question to be rhetorical. “Well?” he ground out.

“Four moon’s worth, my lord,” Davos finally admitted, shoulders slumping. “And no, no word. But,” he added, hopefully, “It has only been a couple of months, it’s possible they got caught in a storm and drifted far off course. We could hear from them any day now.”

Stannis pictured another storm, which did much worse than just push a ship off course. “It’s also possible that same storm helped the sea to swallow them, as has happened countless times before. We’d be waiting for news from the dead.”

By the grimness in Davos’s eyes, Stannis knew he couldn’t dispute the point. Davos himself had no doubt been witness to many storms, and perhaps had even know what it was to barely escape with his life.

He turned back to Cressen. “Losing those ships cut the emergency fund down to nothing. Tell me, do you propose I starve my family of basic comforts? That I prove myself incapable of supporting them, to the point that I must beg the bank for more time? No, I say,” he thrust his hand thought the air in finality. “I have decided to see one debt end, by any means necessary, because this kingdom houses more than spoiled Highborn playing games.”

Cressen was still wringing his hands. “My lord please. I understand your reasons well, and you know we only commend them and your loyalty to the kingdom. But Astapor is a…dangerous gamble, and one very unlike you. If this news were to come out, you know what ramifications it could have. I urge you stop this contract and revisit it only after your have finished grieving.”

He was almost unaware of how his arm swept out, knocking the things on his table to the floor. The inkwell clattered as it collided against the cold stone, and the smell of ink soon permeated the room. Stannis felt as if he were shaking from rage, but his voice, went it came, was iron hard.

“Grieving?” he asked, and very deliberately placed both palms flat on the table and pushed to his full height, towering over them both. “I am your lord. Do not presume to insinuate that I am somehow of a faltering capacity and that my decisions are irrational. I took on this debt for this kingdom, not only to see justice done against a capricious queen, but to ensure the future is one of stability and peace. Every great family in Essos and Westeros has dealings with the bank, every rich man owes them money or, at the very least, a favour. They have more than enough means to fund a Rebellion, and His Grace is in no position to weather it. Not to mention the shadowed pattern of
assassination against those that renegade on their debt.”

A sharp shake of his head, teeth gritted.

“I would sooner trust in Tywin Lannister’s tender mercies than the Braavos’—for at least he wouldn’t spark a war against his own grandson to reclaim his money. How Robert could ever have been fool enough to borrow from them, let alone reaching the point of needing to to keep the realm functioning, I cannot say. The crown was repaying it, true, although slowly, but I suspect with coin borrowed from others. To what point could he keep borrowing before debts were called in, and the Iron Bank no longer gets paid? Tell me, what could a few rumors about Astapor, nearly impossible to prove, do in comparison to this threat?”

“My lord,” Davos said, quiet. “Your objectives are admirable, no doubt. But could it be possible that they’re also…justifications?”

Stannis sharply straightened and folded his arms behind his back, staring the men down, angry. “Let me make myself clear: I am not a boy asking for your approval. And unless you’d prefer to advise another, you will keep silent.”

The two men stared at him, mute, before sharing a quick look between them. Stannis ground his teeth so hard the pain reverberated throughout his skull. Finally, the men bowed, “Yes, my lord.”

His stomach was churning, and he felt as if he would be ill. There had been so much blood. I couldn’t do anything. I failed.

I will not fail again.

“Call a maid,” he snapped, gesturing to the spilled ink, which had stained the edge of the gray Norvosi rug. “Seven Hells, this scent is revolting.”

Everything was going smoothly so far. He was still awaiting word from Volantis, but was never the less uncomfortably confident the deal would go well. This was a necessary evil, Stannis reasoned.

As soon as the Iron Bank debt was paid, he swore, it would end. He’d already paid off a fifth of it; at this rate he’d be finished by the new century. Just five more years. Hopefully, he could keep Mott for that long. The man seemed to enjoy Dragonstone, especially now that his workload had lessened, and his presence was drawing apprentices seeking his knowledge and rich men seeking his skill. The increase in people was good for the island, growing the market and village. During his last visit to Dragonsone, Stannis had managed to convince him to teach his young apprentice, Gendry, the method. Mott had insisted it was a waste of time, that the boy didn’t have “the needed materials” and only scoffed when Stannis had assured him he’d buy whatever tools were necessary.

Part of Stannis’s motivation, beyond self interest, was that the boy was another one of Robert’s bastards. Learning how to smelt the ore would make him a highly demand blacksmith, more so than he would be already as an apprentice to the famous Tobho Mott. It would allow the boy to go far in his chosen profession. While Stannis wouldn’t go so far as to say he felt any familial bonds towards the dozen or so of Robert’s natural born children at Dragonstone, he still ensured they were apprenticed and taken care of.

At the very least, no relation of his would be a whore.

So far, none of Mott’s apprentices had succeeded in learning to smelt the metal—Stannis allowed them to try only if they signed a contract vowing three years of exclusive service—and so far Mott was still the only known smith who could smelt aluminum. Furthermore, as far as Stannis knew, the
Essosi were still having trouble finding deposits of the ore.

Maester Cressen had long identified all the mountain ranges in Essos, and Stannis had been anticipating word that the Painted Mountains, controlled by Slaver’s Bay, would yield aluminum. But considering the large order Astapor put in, and the price they’d paid, Stannis’s fears were either unfounded, or they’d been yet unable to find a blacksmith of Mott’s capabilities.

The other range that had his attention was the Bone Mountains, a massive, near impenetrable swarth of rock that cut Essos clean in half. They were treacherously tall, steep peaks with few access points, because large portions were blocked by the Red Waste to the west and the Sand Sea to the east. Five major powers bordered the mountains, and of them it was only Qarth to the southwest that concerned him. The trade city was nothing if not determined to increase their wealth. The Kingdoms of Ifeqevron, to the northwest, was a mystical and heavily forested land that had remained uncivilized for hundreds of years. All his agents had been held off at the mouth of their dark, queerly carved trees. Books Cressen had painstakingly procured read that the people of Ifeqevron had little and less interest in the world outside their forest, and despite bordering the shivering sea, they didn’t even have a fleet. Everyone avoided Ifeqevron, and even the Dothraki reportedly refused to raid ‘the wood walkers.’ The horselords dominated most of the western reaches of the Bone Mountains, but they were raiders and nomads, so they were uninterested in mining. Similarly, to the northeast were the plains of the Jogos Nhai, also populated by a nomadic warrior culture and uninterested in staying still long enough to mine.

Finally there was Yi-Ti to the southeast, which had the greatest access to not only the Bone Mountains but also sole access to another, smaller range to the east called the Mountains of the Morn. He wished luck to anyone who tried to mine that latter range from the south, since it would mean crossing the Shadow Lands. When he’d sent an envoy to Yi Ti to discuss mining for aluminum, he’d been firmly rejection. The Yi-Tish were an ancient, highly spiritual people, who revered the cloud-shrouded peaks as the home of their thousand gods. Every few years, when Yi Ti was struck by a hurricane, gemstones from the mountains would flood the rivers in doves. The Yi Tish regarded the phenomenon as the gods’ reward for surviving the wicked Sea deity’s wrath. Correspondingly, they were famed for their masterful lapidary and exquisite jewelry. The pieces they crafted were extremely difficult to acquire, because exporting the gems was a capital offense.

All this meant that Stannis was fairly comfortable about his and Eddard’s monopoly on the ore. He hadn’t told Eddard of his new deal. He was…uncomfortable with it. (And he knew the other man would cut ties with him.) In his household, only Davos and Cressen knew the truth. Only one ship would ever sail to Volantis, and only the captain knew the nature of the transactions.

No one else could ever know.

Some things even the corrupt Highborn wouldn’t allow. Sure, they filled their brothels with “former” pleasure slaves, didn’t protest when those serving them wore collars or facial tattoos, and were more than happy to ignore the foundation of the Cities they so loved to tour. But a direct relationship with the heart of slavery?

No one in Westeros would abide it.

“A rare day, brother, to find you staring at a wall as if your wits were on par with the jester.” Stannis stiffened, jerking himself from his reverie to find Renly at his door.

He zeroed in on him just in time to see Renly frown and close his eyes, pained.

But regret was an expression rarely seen on Renly Baratheon’s features and thus easy to overlook. Stannis focused on his clothes, instead. The spoiled boy—despite his age of seventeen, he wasn’t a
man in Stannis’s eyes—was bedecked in offending extravagance. The green and gold of his outfit was blinding, with his velvet lined doublet, embroidered leather pants, shiny high boots, and superfluous deerskin gloves. Most of all it was the shimmering golden half-cape he had draped over one shoulder, heavily decorated with dancing stags, that set Stannis’s teeth on edge. The way Renly dressed was a mockery of their name, because despite the imagery he used, it was far more Tyrell than Baratheon in style.

“Of the two of us,” Stannis ground out, interrupting what was no doubt another jeer. “You’re the one dressed like a fool.”

Renly’s eyes snapped open, expression souring. He opened his mouth to retort, but faltered. Stannis waited, holding his brother’s uncertain gaze. Renly looked away, taking a slow breath, and then seemed to force himself to relax.

He looked back up, smiled, and quipped, “Then Moon Boy has excellent taste.”

The boy gripped the door, fingers opening and closing as if debating, before he finally shut it behind him and entered further into the room. He began a meandering exploration, hands clenched behind his back, not looking Stannis’s way or heading towards one of the chairs before his desk. Stannis tracked him, suspicious of this behaviour and wondering what new game this was.

Renly ended up standing before a large map of the known world hung on the wall, upon which little yards of different coloured yarn were pinned, stretching from location to location. His profile was to Stannis, and the lord of Dragonstone couldn’t understand the expression on the boy’s face. He looked so…unwilling? For a few silent moments he simply watched his brother, who seemed perfectly content to simply exist, studying the map as if it held secrets written in invisible ink.

Stannis couldn’t understand his behaviour, but he hid his confusion behind an unyielding mask. He was waiting for Renly to get to the point of this visit: either discuss some Small Council bushiness—which he’d welcome—or perhaps offer his condolences… which he’d sharply dismiss.

But his brother just stood there, saying nothing else, and Stannis realized his timing was odd if this was about…that. So, he waited. And waited. But Renly just moved on from the map and wandered to the bookshelf, scanning the titles before insolently taking one and flipping through the pages.

The boy smoothed his expression into practiced nonchalance as he read. He kept shifting his weight from leg to leg.

Unwilling to play along with whatever this was, or to chase after answers when Renly had been the one to come to him, Stannis resolutely returned to his attention the the Naval report. He decided to read it a fourth time and make note of any unacceptable grammatical errors. He’d let Renly stew until he overcame whatever hesitancy gripped him.

Unfortunately, Stannis soon learned which of them had the greater patience.

After twenty minutes, during which he’d failed to read past the first page, Stannis acknowledge that it was futile. Renly apparently would wait all day if he needed to. Either being Master of Laws was effortless, or the boy didn’t take it seriously enough to care. Whichever it was, Renly didn’t seem at all impatient; to the contrary, he’d begun to actually read the tomb, rather that just flipping through it too quickly to absorb anything.

Stannis felt a familiar tick emerge in his jaw: he was completely unable to focus. There was too much unsaid between them, too much shared history viewed from different lenses. A heaviness shrouded the room, and much as he didn’t want to…
Stannis decided to confront it.

He leaned back, document in hand, and considered his brother. The dinner had more than shown that there was some seriousness hiding under Renly’s childish behaviour. He was petty and blatantly refused to accept hard truths, yes, but he had some reasonable grievances all the same. Stannis had never found it worth considered just how much the Siege, or his actions during it, had effected his younger brother. Never considered that perhaps some of Renly’s resentment was...warranted.

Or perhaps I hadn’t wanted to acknowledge it.

Maybe that was why looking at Renly since he’d come to King’s Landing had proven...difficult. After ten years of raising his own children, Stannis could acknowledge that the way he’d treated his brother at Storm End had been incorrect. He could have tried a bit harder to indulge the boy. To be more patient, as he’d learned to be with Daenerys. As he was with Steffon and Ryelle.

During the siege especially, Stannis regretted his choices. He’d dismissed the boy harshly when he cried, scorning his lack of fortitude despite logically knowing he was only a child. Rather than deal with the matter, Stannis had grown used to ordering Cressen to drug Renly to halt particularly loud tantrums.

I never considered that his fits were a plea for reassurance, rather than a symptom of fear.

Back then, he’d rationalized that it was a mercy. Slumber was a kind cradle, and dreams were certainly a gentler reality. Sometimes, Stannis had even been envious of Renly: at seven, he had no responsibilities and could escape for hours at a time. In contrast, Stannis had been a young man of twenty, inexperienced at war and unpopular in the eyes of his vassals, and ever cognizant that he was not the true Lord of Storm’s End.

‘In their eyes, I’m not Robert, and certainly not father.’

During that last month before Ser Davos had saved them, when the hunger was slowly driving the castle mad and Cressen began speaking of cannibalism, Stannis had scarcely been able to sleep more than an hour a day. Every time he closed his eyes, he imagined awakening to find the Tyrells at his bedside, ready to deliver him to the tender mercies of Aerys Targeryen. Robert wouldn’t surrender for his brothers—of that Stannis had been certain. If the castle fell, they’d fall with it.

And hunger quickly bred betrayal.

When he’d caught Ser Gawen Wylde and three ‘loyal’ knights trying to open the gate and surrender, his every nightmare had been proven true. Ser Gawen had been with them since their grandfather ruled Strom’s End. He’d sworn fealty to three generations of Baratheon Lords, smiling and breaking bread with his family. Stannis and his brothers had interacted with the man nearly every day of their lives. Ser Gawen had been one of the few men Stannis trusted.

Yet the master-at-arms had been prepared to see them burn for a hunk of bread.

I should have catapulted him off the walls as planned, rather that letting him starve in a cell. Instead he’d listened to Cressen, who’d counseled against wasting valuable meat. To this day Stannis remembered that conversation as being tinged with bile.

And men questioned why he’d knighted a common smuggler.

Stannis didn’t regret what he’d done to hold that castle. He’d do the exact same thing now, should his duty ever call for it. But he’d never been able to forgive the fact that no one had ever acknowledged what he’d sacrificed to hold that Keep.
On the contrary, Robert’s first act when they met again was to order him to defeat the remaining loyalists and conquer Dragonstone. Even after he’d accomplished that, there was still not a word of acknowledgment…only a growing disgust at himself for even having such a desire. That anger was only compounded when Robert gave Storm’s End to Renly—and sentenced Stannis to Dragonstone. That pain had given birth to resentment, and when Renly took Loras Tyrell as his squire…

That had burned like salt in unhealed wounds. Oh all the men his brother could have chosen…!

And even though he’d long grown grateful for Dragonstone and had rationalized away his animosity towards the Tyrells, those casual actions in the face of his sacrifices still stung. Meeting Renly again had only worsened Stannis’s opinion. The boy was a frivolous, self-indulgent courtier—everything Stannis scorned. Never mind the animosity and disrespect with which his younger brother addressed him.

Which was why, despite acknowledge his guilt for how he’d treated the boy, Stannis found it pointless to ‘mend’ their relationship. Their personalities were so dissonant that there was really little point in making an effort to establish a ‘brotherly’ bond. Rather, attempting to do so would only result in antagonism.

He would treat his brother objectively, he decided. He’d cast aside his resentment and overcome the memories that had caused undue strain between them. They could wipe the past clean and focus only on the present. He’d afford Renly a bit more tolerance than he did to other lords, in honor of their familial bond, so they could achieve a professional and amicable relationship.

Yes, perfect. There was no need to play at being ‘friends.’

I wouldn’t even know where to start. He had more important matters to attend to, anyway.

Finally, carefully impersonal, he prompted, “Is there some purpose for this visit, my lord?”

Renly tensed, fingers gripping the book tightly, and for a long moment Stannis thought he would ignore the question. But after a sharp inhale, the boy replaced the book and pivoted with a practiced courtiers smile.

Stannis ruthlessly suppressed his instinctive scorn and forced his expression to remain neutral. He met his brother’s gaze as if the boy were a stranger.

Renly’s smile faltered.

Stannis waited. “Well?”

“I…I was simply awaiting indication that you were free, brother,” he smirked, recovering. “I learned early on not to presume that I come before business.”

Stannis didn’t react, beyond a hidden stiffening of his legs. He concealed the twinge of guilt behind an implacable visage. Neutrality was already proving more difficult than anticipated, but of course Renly hadn’t yet reached the conclusions Stannis had. The boy would come to see how amicable distance was best for them and the realm. The strain between the Masters of Laws and Ships would end here, and they could move towards productive coexistence.

“Your purpose?” he prompted again.

The smirk disappeared, and some emotion Stannis couldn’t identify shadowed his expression. Renly’s bored mien, usually flawless, wavered.
Already this method proves valuable, if it can curb Renly’s childish behaviour. It would save them a lot of time during future interactions.

Renly swallowed and crossed his arms over his chest, hunching imperceptibly. “My office is the first in the hall—not that you’ve ever bothered to greet me as you walk past—and I do occasionally have business to tend to. I am the Master of Laws,” he boasted. “Even Robert has noted of how much more smoothly things are being run now that I’m here.”

Stannis made a concentrated effort to conceal his rising irritation, forcing it away with all his considerable willpower. He barely managed not to grind his teeth. “And what does the location of your office have to do with me?”

Only a hint on impatience coloured his voice, and Stannis felt like he deserved more than a fair share of praise for it.

Renly didn’t seem to agree, considering how snide his voice became. “This last week the Targaryen had been impeding my work. Either entertain the girl already, or order her to stay away. How you tolerate her presence is beyond me.”

Stannis drew back, forced neutrality morphing into annoyance. “I beg your pardon?”

“Of course this would elicit some emotion,” Renly scoffed, but something in his gaze was triumphant, as if he’d uncovered a truth. He uncrossed and recrossed his arms, shifting his weight.

Stannis didn’t notice. “She hasn’t made her presence known,” he noted. His voice was faintly puzzled. Perhaps concerned.

Renly laughed once, a hollow thing. “She thinks you’re angry, which would be obvious to anyone but you.”

Stannis frowned, but it was more general annoyance than anger.

Renly smirked, but the amusement was bitter at best. “I admit she made for a rather gratifying figure: another child clueless about how to approach you. But then, I should have known you had no idea, or you’d have jumped to do her bidding.”

Stannis ignored the ridiculous accusation, focusing on the information itself. Daenerys had apparently been coming daily for a week, but never made herself known. That she assumed him still angry was likely, although not accurate. Admittedly, he had been enraged at her thoughtless behaviour. She’d humiliated him before his younger brother, giving away a weakness he’d only confessed, months ago, to spare her feelings. But he hadn't been angry with her, or rather, he’d not even thought of her—of anything beyond work—since…since he’d left Myra’s room.

Stannis swallowed, shuffling his documents so as to avoid looking up.

“Very well, I’ll address it.”

The words held a hint of dismissal, but Renly only shifted again, making no move to leave.

After a few long seconds of silence, during which he gathered his composure and locked away the memories, Stannis finally lifted cool eyes to his brother. Renly was studying him with a hesitating gaze. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, but apparently couldn’t find the words. A rarity.

“Is there anything else?” Seven Hells, why did the boy keep lingering? What exactly did he want and why couldn’t he just come out and say it?
Renly cleared his throat and offered a strained smile. “I… I suppose I can use this opportunity to offer my condolences. I’ve been terribly remiss, not having done so before. If you’ll excuse my rudeness, brother.”

Suddenly, an unpleasant explanation for this behavior occurred to him: was Renly… pitying him? Stannis could abide by *that* even less than mockery. His chest tightened, harshening his voice. “Fine.”

A pause, their eyes locked, Stannis in challenge, Renly shadowed by that same emotion he kept glimpsing. Pity, no doubt. Renly kept his smile in place though, unlike the other ‘well wishers,’ who’d drawn back as if dismayed.

“I’ve heard word that… the Lady Myra keeps to her rooms,” he noted. “I hope she’s well.”

Stannis gripped the document, crumbling the parchment.

*What? It’s been a fortnight. Cressen assured me that she’s recovered… physically. He’d have to send the Maester back to confirm, for surely if she were able she’d have already… resumed her activities. Everything should have returned to normal by now.*

He became aware that his lungs were shrieking for air, and he took a deliberately slow breath. His voice was contemptuous, “Are you insinuating that I can’t care for my own wife? Of course she’s well.”

Another long silence, in which Stannis was beginning to feel as if he were being stripped bare. His hand was shaking; he hid it under the desk, gripping his knee.

“You didn’t know, did you?” Renly mused, tilting his head. The accusation of ignorance made Stannis bristle, and Renly’s eyes picked up on it immediately. His next words were triumphant. “Just like for the Targaryen. Just like for *me*. You couldn’t handle it, so you chose not it. That’s it, isn’t it? If something causes you *sorrow*, you just ignore everything related to it. It’s why everyone thinks you’re *heartless*.”

Renly seemed equal parts delighted and relieved, and Stannis decided an amicable relationship was impossible, because he was growing to *despise* this boy. His whole body was so tense he could barely keep from shaking.

So what if Stannis found conversation taxing and complicated in ways he’d noticed others *did not*. So what if… if something *irreversible* occurred, he chose to focus his attention on productive matters? So what if he’d stayed away from Myra? What could he possible do for her, besides stand there like a useless lump? His presence wouldn’t change the fact that their— that the fetus had been *malformed*. That its fate had been sealed months ago.

Why bother dwelling on something that he couldn’t *change*!?

‘*It’s why everyone sees you as heartless.*’

*Daenerys reluctance to speak to him made his chest tighten painfully as he considered that perhaps Myra had also… perceived his distance in an unintended way.*

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Renly urged, crossing his arms over his chest and gripping his own biceps. A wide-eyed, expectant expression shadowed his features, and a smile was widening his lips. “*This* is why you were a poor brother. Why you always reject—”

“I will not be mocked any further!” Stannis roared, surging to his feet.
Renly drew back, his fingers whitening. “What—I’m not—!” he frowned, then looked down a moment, lips pressed tightly, before recapturing Stannis’s gaze. His expression could be called petulant. “I’m saying that I understand. And I could—could help you be…better. Teach you.” He cleared his throat again, not meeting Stannis’s increasingly merciless eyes, and carelessly said. “Now I know why we’ve never seen eye to eye, but I am your brother and—”

“I’ve tolerated this absurd conversation long enough,” he hissed. “Get out of my sight, you dimwitted child.”

Renly threw his arms down, expression cracking and allowing honest anger to shine through. “I’m giving you a chance to join my circle! To be well liked!”

A sharp laugh, dark and scornful. “You think you are ‘well liked’? You’re nothing but a Tyrell’s doll. A stepping stone!” A sharp exhale, and he turned away in dismissal. “I would sooner die than be one of you.”

Renly reared back as if physically struck, the vulnerability in his gaze that of a wounded animal. For a heartbeat, his lip shook and his eyes gained a new shine, and Stannis recalled the child he’d been. Immediately, he knew shame, but it was poisoned by righteous indignation, so he wouldn’t take it back.

Animosity would be the only thing between them.

Renly’s expression closed off completely, rendering him blank and empty. A smirk made its way slowly onto his lips, only one side lifting.

“My heartfelt condolences to the lady Baratheon, then, my lord,” the boy sneered. “How grateful she must be for your famous tact… during these difficult times.” The spear was so piercing that Stannis almost raised his hand to search for a wound.

“Get out!” Stannis barely halted himself from physically retaliating. His hand gripped uselessly, longing for a sword.

Renly bowed, perfect and mocking, and pivoted on his heel. He jerked open the door, strode out, and pointedly slammed it shut behind him. Moments later, another boom resonated down the hall as he forced his own door shut.

For many seconds, Stannis just sat there, staring sightlessly, at the documents. His harsh, rasping breaths were the only sound in the room. Something complicated was welling up inside him, bubbling to the surface, and trying to escape despite his best efforts. He bowed his head, right hand covering his eyes and gripping his short hair, and left one pressing painfully against his mouth, trying to halt the flood.

Slowly, the anger and poison faded, and the shame rose up. Renly’s words played in his head, burning him with their accusation, their truth.

‘...would be obvious to anyone but you...if something causes you sorrow, you just ignore everything...why everyone thinks you’re heartless...why you were a poor brother...heartfelt condolences to the lady Baratheon…’

He clenched his teeth so hard he thought they would shatter. He was such a coward, wasn’t he? He’d been a coward since…

“Tell me, Stannis, what is a lord?” Lady Cassana asked, turning her head towards the thirteen-year-old Stannis as they rode through lands of Storm’s End. Stannis frowned at her, annoyed in the
way of a young boy whose mother had the tendency to ask him questions at random and switch the conversation to whatever topic fit her mood. They’d been speaking of Steffon and Cassana’s departure to the Free Cities, and how Stannis was tasked with ensuring baby Renly was well cared for why they were gone. He’d been annoyed to be tasked with such a thing, but also prideful that she trusted him enough to leave Renly behind. But, suddenly, she’d once again derailed their perfectly tolerable topic.

Stannis was most comfortable spending his time indoors, but when the mood struck her his mother hunted him down, stole the book from his hand, and physically dragged him towards the stables. That mood was rare, true, as Cassana was almost as withdrawn as Stannis. It was why Maester Cressen was primarily in charge of his upbringing. His father focused on Robert and the Stormlands, while his mother focused on herself and, sometimes, Renly. He didn’t know why the occasional outing interested her, or why Stannis was the only one she ever took. (He wouldn’t deny that he felt smug, just a bit, that in this Robert wasn’t the first choice.)

“Father is a lord. He inherited the title.” That was obvious. “He rules the land. Fulfills his duty to the people and the crown.” And what did it matter, really, Stannis wondered bitterly. He was the second son, Robert was heir. He’d be a lord in name only. Or maybe a lord in all but name, considering what Robert was like.

“Yes, yes, all that is true,” Cassana clucked her tongue, rolling her eyes. Stannis fumed in silence. His mother was so odd compared to other highborn women. But then, she was his mother, so he supposed she’d be unique. When he married, it would be to a docile, biddable woman who’d leave him in peace and not involve him in these labyrinthian conversations. “But what is he for his family? What should he be? Robert, the poor dear, is leagues away from the answer, but Steffon understands. You, I think, will as well.”

He scowled, refusing to be baited, and just narrowed his eyes at her in silent demand.

She laughed again. “I will bring you a fool, Stannis, so you may learn to laugh!” Once again she showed no concern for the topic at hand! “And then, I’ll tell you what a lord really is. For his House.”

But she’d died, and he’d never learned it. Patchface, the promised fool, was left without his capacities, having lost an essential part of himself when their ship had sunk. Maybe if she’d lived, or maybe if he’d bothered to think about her, about Father, once in these last last eighteen years—rather than locking them away, locking everything away…

Maybe he’d know what to do.

The door exploded inwards, slamming against the wall so hard half the castle must have heard it. Stannis jerked upward, heart in his throat, and there was Renly, mouth open and face twisted, ready to unleash more poison.

But whatever he saw on Stannis’s face at the moment stopped him. They considered each other, these two men that shared blood, but were so different in every way.

These two men that, perhaps, wanted the same thing, but had equal little idea how to get it.

“Just tell me,” Renly demanded. “Is it my… inclinations? Is that why you can’t…tolerate me? Why you don’t want to—to…”

He trailed off, swallowing, and looked down. The words were barely a whisper. “Mend things.”
Stannis shifted, feeling as if he’d fallen into some foreign land and the figure before him was an impersonator wearing his brother’s likeness. The real Renly would have never confronted him honestly, choosing instead to rely on a million sly words, each with their own hidden meaning. Usually his conversations were burdened with mind-numbing puzzles, so this sudden burst of honest was unnerving.

“I…what?” He didn’t understand what his brother was asking.

Renly’s head snapped up, a scowl stretching his lips. “Don’t pretend, Stannis. I know that you know, I’ve seen the way you look at us,” he snapped. Then looked down, muttering, “Everyone knows… but who’d dare to publicly shun the brother of the king?” A bitter smile. “Except the other brother.”

Stannis exhaled, exhausted, and clueless as to the point Renly was trying to make, but he’d confronted his own cowardice, hadn’t he? So he’d at least think about the words without letting himself get angry. That said, Stannis was aware of Renly’s unnatural inclinations towards men. No one would insinuate it to his face, but Renly and his squire didn’t act with any measure of prudence. Just watching the boys spar was enough to disturb him.

“You need to marry and have an heir. You’re at the proper age, and if you allow these inclinations to inhibit that, you’ll be putting Storm’s End at risk. You’d be betraying your people and scorning your duty, which father—” he stumbled, forcing himself to say it. “Held so dearly. So I suppose that, yes, I don’t approve.”

Renly stared, and then pushed his hand thought his long hair as if needing a moment to gather himself. “But if I—did all that. Wed and-and had an heir. Or even, chose an heir from one of our cousins, but still—still was inclined to be…as I am, then…?”

He met Renly’s gaze frankly. “Then I’ve no interest nor do I care about what you chose to do in your bedroom. I’m not sure what else you want from me.”

He lowered his eyes back to the document, that pool of bitterness welling, welling, welling ever closer. He struggled to push it back, to hold himself together—to be the only type of lord he knew how to be.

“Are we done here?” he asked, weary. He needed some time alone, he needed to push the bitterness down so he could think clearly about his next move. To evaluate…everything.

But apparently the answer was no, and Renly had chosen today of all days to bombard him. Who could have guessed Daenerys simply walking by for a few days would have agitated his brother to this degree?

Stannis found a sad kind of irony that he’d thought such a thing upon hearing his brother’s next question.

“Daenerys Targaryen…she loves you. Openly. You must have shown her some …care.” Renly took a shallow breath. “Why her?”

The silence stretched, Stannis staring down at his work, feeling Renly’s eyes on him. He closed his own, now genuinely exhausted. He didn’t even bother to try and puzzle out this new direction of the conversation, because Renly’s focus seemed to be as variable as the moon.

He resembled their mother, in that way.

Obligingly, Stannis contemplating the question, hoping it would be the end of it.
‘Why her?’ Because she loves me as I am. Because she’s never been afraid to face me (before). Because sitting in the sun and watching her play was the closest I’ve ever been to peace.

Finally he just stated, “Because she’s my responsibility.”

That, apparently, was the wrong thing to say.

Renly’s mournful calm shattering into appalled frustration. He surged forward, coming to lean over the desk and slapping his right palm against his own chest, jewel-littered fingers spread wide.

“So was I!” he shouted. “But you never showed me even a fragment of—of—” He cursed, and then just waved his hand to encompass Stannis’s form “This. Never gave indication of having a heart! Denying me—always denying—!”

“I denied you nothing!” Stannis surged up, towering over his brother. “You grew up with the very best—the siege was not—”

“I wanted more than things! I wanted—mother and father were—you never—!” A hissed in breath. “Why her? What did she give you that I couldn’t!”

Stannis snapped.

His parents. His brothers. The loss of his child. It was all too much. Just like that, years of pent up frustration, resentment, and grief spewed forth.

“A choice!” he roared. “I chose her, do you understand? For once, I got to choose!” Renly flinched, growing so pallid he seemed as if he would faint, but Stannis was too far gone to stop. “I was fourteen years old when they died. Fourteen; when I watched them die. Four years younger than you are now. You were never meant to be my responsibility! I didn’t want it—any of it! I wanted a brother—not a son!”

A sharp inhale.

“Do you know who came to see their empty caskets? Sharks. Lords offering condolences with empty smiles, sniffing for weakness. Do you think I had time to mourn while they circled? That I could afford to be soft when they crowed over every failure, every humiliation? No, I had no time to be a father—I had to learn to be a lord,” he spat. “Because Robert—your beloved Robert—he left!”

Stannis collapsed against the desk, palms flat and arms rigid. He bowed his head, clenching his eyes tightly, echoing the motion with his fists. He was sweating, he suddenly realized. And his heart was racing in his chest as if he’d been in battle.

Renly was completely silent. Such a heaviness descended upon the room that Stannis could feel his shoulders straining. He swallowed, mouth dry, slowly growing mortified as he recalled everything he’d said. All the weakness he’d admitted. He felt himself shaking, ashamed and exhausted. He could sense everything he’d never allowed himself to feel—never had time to—threaten to swallow him.

Myra…we lost our son. Moisture welled in his eyes.

His next inhale was ragged, and he turned his back to Renly at once. “Do me one kindness—for once in your life—and obey me. Go.”

Please.
Footsteps made their way to the door, and the hinges creaked as it opened. Renly’s voice was soft, to the point Stannis barely heard it, but the very sound was like claws through fresh wounds. “No one knows another’s mind. Talk to your wife, Stannis. To your children. To that…to lady Daenerys. Stop ignoring what happened…or it will fester. Like we did.”

Renly walked out, closing the door silently. Stannis slumped back against his chair, so exhausted his body shook. Something wet trailed down his cheeks—a salty taste on his lips.

He wanted to see his wife.

Chapter End Notes

I mapped the Citadel, using the info from canon about what it should hold, plus my own ideas. Here’s the link: https://www.deviantart.com/magicmoon111/art/Citadel-Map-772667100?ga_submit_new=10%3A1542264240

Be kind to Myra. Everyone deals with tragedy in different ways, and Myra is similar to Stannis in her methods. Except while he emotionally isolates himself, she does so physically. How her husband reacted certainly didn’t help her grief. She simply can’t deal with her children right now, and even a mother deserves her time to grieve.

This is Jon’s present to Dany <3 :) https://cdn.discordapp.com/attachments/404742732939001866/514519918138490880/49689ac887873365f3b9058910e7b26d.png

In canon, Edric Dayne’s father is unknown, so I named him Aedion to follow the A-pattern, and Edric’s mother was sickly a lady from a minor Dornish house. He has no siblings.

A shout out to Nerdman3000 for bringing an interesting theory to my attention that perfectly complimented and strengthened what I had planned for Starfall. Next chapter is dedicated to you! :D

Oh, and R+L=J >:}


This chapter is dedicated to Nerdman3000. Thank you for bringing this theory to my attention! Also, a shoutout to MagnusXXZ, EloImJosh, and morrigan01, cause I live for speculation!

A happy belated birthday to reparations_only. I'm sorry it wasn't ready in time, and I hope you had a great one! <3

Welp, so much for the end of December. The problem was I had to push back both the Jaime and Myra PoV to next chapter, and thus took out 15K. They just didn't fit with the theme of the chapter.

Thank you so much to MariDark for reading and critiquing with me! <333

Now, I have a question: The chapters take a really long time at this point (which I’m sure you’ve noticed) because I have other obligations (grad school, work) and fitting everything I need in a chapter in accordance to my plan results in very long chapters. This story has grown so much bigger than what I originally conceived as I delve into the increasingly complicated plots and characters (which we all know I love to explore), and thus trying to keep the original plan makes me really drag my feet since there’s so much to finish each chapter.

So, I can either continue the word length (and probably pace) as is, and we’ll get Jon-Dany meeting around chapter 60. Or, I can shorten the chapters which should result in faster updates (altho not very exciting things happening since this is a very slow development) but an increased chapter count such as each Act would be much longer than 10ish chapters. Life gets in the way tho, so I can’t promise everything.

Let me know :)

Warning in this chapter for mentions and discussions of suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Joffrey wasn’t an easy child, but he was he wasn’t very difficult either. A few whispered words, a few vows of loyalty, a few gently stressed pleas for secrecy…

“It was lord Arryn that sent your mother away, my prince. The Hand manipulated his Grace into believing lies.”

Joffrey had already been a beautiful package of spoiled petulance. Taking away his mother was all that was needed to coat him in rage. Once again others had done the hard work, and all that was left was to make use of the result—to direct that bitterness. Not a difficult task at all… in the right hands.

“Jon Arryn wants to be king through you. Don’t you see how he keeps you isolated, how he restrains you and control you? All he wants is a puppet.”

How easy it was, to drive wedges, to cultivate resentment, to invent shadows filled with enemies.
How fortunate, that the prince was too young to know better, and Arryn too busy and blind to see it happening. Getting past Cersei Lannister had always been much more difficult.

The only man that may have put a stop to it was a dog that hated them all—his master included.

“I beg that you keep these truths between us—lest your enemies isolate you further. So that I am continue to serve you.”

Joffrey was only nine: it was a malleable age such that Arryn may have eventually succeeded in molding him into a man. Perhaps even into a decent king. But that simply wouldn’t do.

“I am loyal to you, my prince. As I have always been.”

Grooming children had always been a simple task.

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The princess Arianne Martell wore her beauty proudly. As a child, she’s been pudgy and awkward, and she’d prayed every day to the Seven to gift her with a woman’s power. Even for the heir to Dorne, beauty was a weapon of priceless value.

Although part of it was simple vanity: I wanted to be desired.

The gods had granted her wish, and while she’d never gained her cousins’ towering height, she’d gained her lady mother’s lush figure. Arianne’s eyes were onyx gems, her lips deep pink bows, her hair ebony ringlets that fell well below her waist, and her skin a flawless golden bronze from her time in the sun. Her breasts were large, her waist tiny, and her hips lusciously full. She wore sheer garments and shimmering silks to best emphasize these traits, and dipped herself in jewels to display her status.

She gloried in the lust and envy of men and women, in the love of a chosen few. She gloried further in taking them to bed, watching their eyes as she moved over or under them, sharing their breaths and reveling in their love. They valued her—they validated her. Now nearly nineteen, she’d had many men in her bed: all of them for pleasure and some of them for power.

She needed people on her side—she needed allies.

Five years ago she’d learned the terrifying truth: she was no heir at all. She’d gone to her father’s solar to kiss him good night, and found only a half finished letter to her younger brother Quentyn. Doran Martell wanted him to inherit Dorne.

Father…plans to disinherit me?

She’d cried for a dozen days when she’d come to terms with it, and then she’d raged for a dozen more. She’d only ever wanted to be of use to him, to make him proud, and yet he hated her so much that he’d decided that she, at fourteen, was lacking when compared to her nine year old brother!

Is that the real reason he’d fostered Quentyn with one of his most powerful bannermen? So when the day comes, her brother could steal her birthright with an army at his back?

Every day for almost a year she’d imagined confronting her father. She’d scripted a thousand different conversations, each one a more dramatic mummery. Sometimes, her imagined self would be humble, other times, angry or indignant or pitiful. Once, in her bed late at night, she imagined crying pretty tears and begging him on her knees not to steal her birthright.

Tell me my mistake, father. Le me correct it!
But she’d never been brave enough to confront him. She’d been proven a coward that year and every year since. That knowledge burned worst of all; a coward in Dorne was an abomination. It had poisoned her love for him, that unfinished letter.

*The Prince of Dorne is a weak man—of course he would prefer his mirror-image son over his vivacious daughter.*

In anger, she’d resorted to underhanded methods to illicit his ire. Small rebellions, childish acts to get his attention, dozens of methods that were planned to be cutting and elegant…but came out petulant instead. She’d wanted to enrage him so that he would attend to her, correct her…show her that he expected more from her!

During one such scheme the Princess of Dorne had, at age fourteen, given her virginity to the Bastard of Godsgrace. She’d told her father immediately after. She was his daughter, and although this was Dorne, a princess losing her maidenhead to Daemon *Sand* should have given the Prince *some* pause. Made him angry, even!

A daughter losing her maidenhead to *anyone* should have concerned her father—if only to confirm that she was alright.

Yet Doran Martell had done *nothing*. (He only did nothing.)

“*Ask the maester for moon tea,*” he’d said, seeming mildly distributed as he did when her clothes were particularly revealing. Then, he invited her to a game of cyvasse, the matter closed.

She’s turned away form him at once, running from his solar in tears. His reaction had been another blow, although she couldn’t say why it had hurt so much.

Gradually, she’d stopped seeking him out. Stopped running to his rooms to show him her new dresses, stopped bringing him flagons of particularity delicious wine to share, stopped weaving crowns of orange blossoms and dancing for him.

She’d stopped going to his solar to kiss him goodnight.

*Weeks after discovering the letter he found her sitting at a window ledge, one foot dangling over the edge. It was a small alcove, hidden from the world, with a view of desert sands. She was alone; a rare thing for a princess that thrived in the company of others.*

*“Are you well?”* His voice was soft, as if gentling a small creature. *None of the fond exasperation or sweet warmth—lies, both—that he usually spoke with.*

*Arianne made herself smile. “Yes, father.”*

*For a long moment he contemplated her, taking in her red eyes and blatantly fake smile. But he didn’t push.*

*(Perhaps he’d thought them a trick of the light. Perhaps he just didn’t care.)*

Had one of her beloved cousins begun to act so distant, she would not rest until she had answers. She would fight a barrage of scorpions if it meant ensuring her loved one was well. Yet her father had only asked one lukewarm question and never mentioned it again.
He asked out of obligation, not concern.

*Why don’t you love me, father?*

Being in his presence became a special kind of torment, for she loved him as much as she feared him. Every time she saw him the wound shed blood anew. She ached to speak her mind, to demand the truth, but she was always muzzled by her own cowardice. That fact burned worst of all.

*How can anyone trust a craven?*

Sometimes, she wished she could hate him.

Three years ago, when he’d taken Tyene from her, she’d come close.

Doran had sent Arianne to Skyreach on his behalf to celebrated Lord Fowler’s nameday. She’d been accompanied by her childhood companions, her cousin Nymeria Sand, the Fowler twins, and a large retinue. On prince Oberyn’s insistence, Tyene had stayed behind. Were her mercurial uncle not the source, Arianne would have been suspicious. She’d assumed he planned to show her cousin some new poison, and only Tyene was allowed to know *those* secrets. Her sweetest cousin looked the least like her sire, and yet resembled him most.

But when the princess returned to Sunspear, eager to recount her pleasures, she’d found that her her most trusted companion was gone. Deaf to her pleas, Doran only said that Tyene was doing her duty as a daughter of Dorne. He’d delivered the news with the cool distance she’d come to expect. Her uncle Oberyn, usually willing to be swayed by her tears, remained mute on the subject.

“*Tyene is well, so cheer yourself, niece. Revel in your adventures so that when you reunite you can fill your days with stories.*”

But Arianne had *not* been cheered.

She’d been plagued by worry that Doran had sent Tyene away because unlike the other Sand Snake, her poisonous cousin was loyal to Arianne. After months of painful silence, she’d finally confided with her cousin about Doran’s letter. Tyene had been enraged and tired to get Arianne to tell the elder Sand Snakes, but fierce Obara and vengeful Nymeria would have surely confronted her father. Then the news would spread, and Arianne would have no chance to protect her birthright.

*(She refused to be humiliated.)*

To cover up her cowardice, Arianne insisted that she was keeping silent because she didn’t yet have the power to challenge the Prince. Only after saying it did it become her goal, the argument convincing Arianne as much as it had convinced Tyene. The princess had made her cousin swear a vow of secrecy, and while Tyene had not been happy, she’d promised to keep her silence. Together, the girls began conspiring to thwart the Prince’s scheme.

Their solution had been simple: marriage.

Wedding for power to a man of her father’s choice was a reality she’d long accepted. A princess was not free to love: she had a duty to her country, and Arianne Martell loved her people well. However, she and Tyene conspired to find a husband who could challenge her father and support Arianne when the time came to make her bid for the throne. Her best bet, they decided, was marrying the heir to a Great House as soon as possible. It was crucial that she wed before her father announced his intent to disinherit her, or she would no longer be as valuable a prospect for a Great Lord. The might of her husband’s kingdom would become her own and he’d support her claim if only to insure that *his own* son or firstborn daughter would inherit after her.
“You can always trust the highborn to war over a throne,” Arianne smirked.

Tyene smiled with an innocent guile. “Even if he does not wish to, there are many ways to... persuade him.”

When Renly Baratheon had come to Sunspear four years ago, she’d tried her best to seduce him—only to be met with polite rejection. Every. Single. Time. He’d never even taken one look at her that hinted at interest, and that slight still stung her to this day. It had served to harden her resolve.

(Renly was much too interested in himself for her tastes, anyway. She wanted a man, not a vain little boy.)

If Storm’s End was not interested, then perhaps Highgarden would be: Willas Tyrell was unwed. The fact that he was crippled and supposedly bookish did not concern her overmuch, since she only planned to spend enough time together to begat heirs. The rest of the time they’d be ruling their own kingdoms. (A small, secret part of her hoped for more from her marriage, but she silenced it. Dorne was more important—always.) Tyene had told her that lord Willas held no resentment towards her uncle for maiming him. It had been an accident, and they came out of it as friends. Arianne would use that familiarity to her advantage.

Confident in their scheme, the girls had planned to abscond to Highgarden and do whatever it took to ensure she was married by the time her father caught up. They been fifteen and sixteen at the time.

But then Tyene disappeared and Arianne’s scheme turned to sand. She dared not go to Highgarden alone, and she dared not enlist anyone else. Who could she trust not to tell her father?

(Had Tyene... told?)

No, my paranoia is too great, Tyene would never!

(And perhaps that letter was a jest.)

But it was no jest and her father proved it in the cruelest ways. When she had finally turned seventeen, the normal age for a lady to wed, what prospective husbands did her dear father offer her? Old, feeble, weak, and disgusting men. Ancient lords, grey lords, some deaf, some blind, and some lacking wits. They were all either of such minor houses as to be ridiculous or so personally repugnant as to be horrifying.

Each man an insult!

Once, Doran had even proposed marriage to Walder Frey. The Lord of the Twins was ancient, had dozens of trueborn children, and had (suspiciously) already outlived seven young wives. Did Doran wish her to be the eighth?!

Never.

To make things even worse, not only did he place horrible matches before her, but he blocked any desirable ones! Just last year Lord Hoster Tully had invited her to spend the new year at Riverrun with his heir. Edmure Tully was young, of sound mind, and reportedly handsome. Arianne had lit candles to the Seven, fervently grateful, and prayed everyday in thanks for such a wonderful match.

But Doran forbade it.

This is my proof: he wont let me marry a powerful man so that Quentyn and his Yornwood supporters will have an easy time usurping me.
Arianne refused to allow her father to do this. Quentyn was not better than her—he was a meek child, a follower. She was the leader that great Dorne deserved! She was of their ancient blood, she was a true daughter of Nymeria!

The throne of Sunspear is my birthright. No one will steal it from me.

“No one will steal it from me,” Arianne whispered, nearly soundless, as the massive wooden doors of the Great Hall parted and bathed her in light.

“The princess Arianne Martell!” The herald’s voice cut into her. She straightened her back and buried her fear under makeup and jewels. Whenever her father formally summoned her to court, every step was like walking down a trail of memories. Every step renewed her fear.

*Is it today? Is it?*

Arianne walked forward with a smile.

The ruling seat of the Prince of Dorne was at the top of the Tower of the Sun under a great dome of glittering gold intertwined with glass. In the late afternoon sun, the cavernous room was lit to display the walls painted with their history: the founding of House Martell, the arrival of Queen Nymeria and her ten thousand ships, and conquest of Dorne, the Targaryen invasion…everything was on those walls. Everything but the Dragons’ Fall. Peppering the murals were elaborate glass sconces shaped like crystal suns, each pregnant with oil and ready to be lit come sundown. The white marble floors were polished to a gloss and inlayed with the occasional colored mosaic of desert plants and animals.

At the forefront of the room directly opposite to where she stood was a dais ten steps high. Towering over the court were two near identical thrones, the right one engraved with the Rhoynish sun and the left with the Martell spear.

One day, that former throne *would* be hers.

Currently, upon the latter sat the Prince of Dorne.

Arianne made her way into the throne room, armored to perfection. This day she was in yellow and orange silks painted with shimmering golden suns. Her dark curls were free under a golden net and around her neck was a choker of cascading beads of coloured glass that rained down over her chest. On ever other finger she wore a ring set with precious stones.

She received several admiring glances as lords, ladies, squires, and servants bowed as she passed. Her stride was one of practiced sensuality.

*Yes, gaze at me. I am the heir to Dorne, and I am as beautiful as the desert at dusk.*

*(Is it today?)*

Flanking her were two of her cherished childhood companions, both towering over her petite frame. To her right was Ser Andrey Dalt—Drey, to those close to him—heir to the Knight of Lemonwood. He was tan, wore a jade scarf around his dark hair that hung over his shoulder, and had on an easy smile. On her left was her milk-brother Garin, one of the orphans of the Greenblood. Garin was slim, swarthy, and wore a jade stud in his right ear. While Drey was warm and went along easily with her desires, Garin teased her about everything to the point that she was often tempted to strangle him.

Taking comfort in their presence, she sent a look around in search of clues. The court was particularly busy today, with hundreds of brightly dressed courtiers united only by one opinion: it was sweltering. The guards and servants were either standing or kneeling; the few honored guests or
heads of the Houses were seated upon settees, chaises, and tables nearest the dais; and the rest of the court was reclining near the walls upon plush carpets and soft sand-filled pillows. There was a low buzz of dozens of conversations, peppered by the occasional loud laugh or playful shout. Most of the lords and ladies were being fanned by servants with large palm leaves. They read books, ate fruits, drank wine, or chatted with companions.

The atmosphere was merry and relaxed, giving no indication that anyone suspected treachery. *But then, why would they?*

Her stomach felt like led and Arianne clenched her hands tightly.

An unusually large group to her left garnered her attention. About a dozen people—highborn and lowborn, ranging from youths to elders—were seated around a low tabled holding a cyvasse board. Arianne slowed in interest, focusing on the distraction with a painful urgency.

Gulian Sandstone, heir to House Qorgyle, and the lady Jynessa, heir to House Blackmont sat on opposite sides of the board. Both were talented, brutal, and cunning players, and their games spanned from hours to days. Even if Arianne were interested in cyvasse, she’d never be their match.

Their moves on the board were almost as entertaining as the insults they hurled at one another. Gulian reached out casually with his Spearman and captured one of Jynessa’s Heavy Horses. He didn’t acknowledge the chatter from their viewers. The lady tilted her head, seeming unimpressed—if her easy smile was anything to go by.

Both in their early twenties, unwed, and attractive, their bickering was as legendary as their games. Gulian had his legs crossed underneath himself and his elbows upon his knees as he leaned over the board. He was dressed in loose dark pants and an emerald vest open to reveal his chest, with four studs in his right ear. Jynessa sat reclining against the wall with her outstretched legs crossed. She was in a flowing cream and blue dress, had beads woven into her brown hair, and multiple jeweled armbands on both arms. Their eyes were intent on the board.

Gulian and Jynessa were bitter rivals and ardent bedmates. Arianne thought they hated each other so deeply only because as heirs to Houses with centuries of bad blood between them, they could never entertain the prospect of marriage. Besides, neither would sacrifice their future position as heads of their Houses.

She’s heard gossip that the second son of one of the Lady Blackmont’s bannermen had come to Sunspear to court Jynessa. Soon after, Gulian had had a particularly *inspired* training session and beaten his sparing partner into the ground. A newsworthy event for the unflappable man. Arianne wondered if the prospective husband was amongst the avid watchers.

“Ten silvers on the lady!” a knight bearing a minor house sigil called out, and a man she recognized as Daemon Sand obliging wrote something upon a small scroll.

“Only ten?” Gulian sounded unimpressed. “A cheap man you’ve found yourself, vulture. A hundred silver on the lady, Daemon.”

*Ah, so her match is present,* she thought as the poor knight flushed when their companions laughed. Arianne made careful note of his face and sigil; House Briar.

“Planning for your inevitable defeat, insect?” Jynessa ‘the vulture’ completely ignored her knight and smirked at her rival. The Qorgyle sigil was a black scorpion, while the Blackmonts donned an ebony vulture. “I suppose you would need the coin as a salve for your ego. Fortunately, I refuse to spare any man his pride. A hundred silver on him, Ser.”
Daemon did as directed with a grin. Gulian looked unmoved but for the minute narrowing of his eyes.

Drey nudged her softly and, much as Arianne would have loved to linger, she forced herself to speed up. She could stall no longer, but thankfully the small drama had succeeded in minutely calming her. Conscious of her father’s gaze, Arianne continued towards the base of the dais. While Drey and Garin stayed behind, she climbed up five steps and stopped on the wide sixth.

*Is it time? Is this it? Will he disinherit me today?*

She was nearly paralyzed by fear before she realized why that was unlikely.

*Quentyn would be here to bare witness to my humiliation—to preen before the court. And old Anders Yronwood wouldn’t miss seeing his precious foster son declared heir. The Bloodroyal’s visits to court were rare due to the animosity rekindled when uncle Oberyn slew his grandfather. Any hint of his coming would have had the court buzzing for days in advance.*

Briefly, she met Areo Hotah’s gaze behind her father’s shoulder, and he offered her a warm nod. Her last remnant of unease vanished. Areo loved her well, and his eyes would show if something was amiss. (He must know…he knew all her father secrets. Knew him better, perhaps, than even uncle Oberyn.)

*It must be something benign,* she concluded, letting out a slow breath. *A feast perhaps—he only trusts me to throw feasts.*

Arianne stepped before her father’s seat and fell to her knees. She lowered her head and made a show of deep obeisance. Doran always gave a little frown when she did this, for as his heir she need only nod her head, but she relished in treating him like the secret tyrant he was. This act was the only way she could show that she knew he planned to take her birthright from her, to condemn her to a fate that would make falling to her knees a matter of custom rather than choice. Arianne did it to remind herself what she stood to lose.

“You summoned me, your highness?” she smiled, rising.

By the sudden quieting of the court, she new more than one person was curious as well. Doran raised a hand to her, and after a moment of surprise, she obediently climbed to his side. He rose to his feet, took her hand, and gently turned her to face the crowd. Her heart doubled in pace—he’d never done such a thing before.

The room buzzed with whispered conversations, the people as surprise by this as Arianne was. Hundreds of eyes zeroed in on her, and she met the gazes of her people—they seemed so small from up here. The sudden weight of their sole attention was nearly as frightening as it was intoxicating.

“My lords, ladies, and honored guests,” Doran began in a calm tone that reached those closest to the dais—the highest of status. A few lower hightborn came nearer, knowing that the taciturn prince never raised his voice, while the majority sent their servants in their stead. The aids hastily squeezed into the edges to take note of the words so they could recount the announcement verbatim. “In celebration of my daughter, the Princess Arianne Martell’s nineteenth nameday, Sunspear is hosting a Grand Tourney. Your beloved princess will preside over the event. She will organize the games, host the feasts, and plan the entertainments. In three moons’ time I welcome the people of Dorne to the Tourney at Sunspear.”

Arianne was stunned, as were many of the spectators; Doran was not one to throw such public events, and Sunspear hadn’t seen a Tourney since the time of Arianne’s grandmother, the reigning
Princess Loreza.

After a shocked moment in which the announcement was absorbed, a cheer went up and the mood buoyed as excitement rose and quickly swept across the room. Arianne felt herself get drawn in by the happiness, and her mind raced at the many fortunes a tourney could bring her. She must light candles to the Father, for His justice, the Mother, for Her mercy, and the Crone, for Her wisdom. This would be a perfect opportunity to show Dorne that she was a capable heiress, which would strengthen her hold on her people. With so many Houses gathered, she’d surely have opportunity to impress powerful potential allies.

“What a marvelous idea, father!” she exclaimed, heart racing, and swept into a deep courtesy. “I will do Dorne proud.”

Arianne ignored the fact that it would also be a grand time for Doran to make any plays against his daughter, for surely he would not be so cruel as to rip away her birthright on her Nameday. Even if he did not love her, she was his daughter and such a humiliation would not sit well with anyone. Doran would need the favor of the lords to disinherit her without opposition.

Doran reached forward and took her hands, and Arianne hated how her heart was shaken for a moment. He helped her up with gentle pressure, and his eyes were fond when he looked down at her. Arianne nearly stepped forward to embrace him, actually taking a step before abruptly halting. Humiliated, she leaned back.

Doran’s slightly opened arms fell slowly to his sides.

“I know you will,” he said after a too-long pause. He folded his hands behind his back.

Doran made a motion and the herald slammed his ornate spear against the ground once, twice, thrice until the room was silent once more. All eyes returned to the Prince, smiles and merriment abounding, and he stepped forward until he was at the edge of the dais. Arianne saw his hands clenched white behind his back.

“In honor of a decade of peace, I invite his Grace, Robert Baratheon, First of his Name; the Lord Jon Arryn of the Eyrie, the Hand of the King and Warden of the East; and the Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, the Warden of the North to partake in these joyous celebrations as my esteemed guests.”

Arianne’s gasp was echoed a dozen times over. The merriment dissipated so swiftly it was as if the air was sucked from the room.

A servant bearing two ornamental challaces appeared at her side, and the Prince took both cups and handed one to the stunned Arianne. She barely managed to close her fingers around it, scanning her father’s face but seeing only his habitual mildness. Around the rooms servants appeared with similar cups for each stunned guest.

Doran raised his cup high, face inscrutable, “Long… may he reign.”

Doran took a long draw, and Arianne watched his throat bob with one swallow. She took her drink slowly, as did many others. Some stared into their cup for a long moment before rising it to their lips. Even the guests who were not as informed of recent history were subdued as they took in the tense atmosphere.

Arianne’s mind was racing as the Dornish red saturated her her mouth in a comforting sourness. Was her father actually serious or was this some odd dream she was having? While he’d sworn fealty to the new king—thereby enraging many of their people—to Doran’s credit he’d had no dealings with
the crown since. Yet now he was blatantly inviting them into the heart of their kingdom? To partake in merriment and celebrate a peace so many of her country men loathed?

If the king came, how would the common folk react? The people of Dorne were not so well mannered as to remain docile. In their history, when a Prince or Princess was unpopular, the small folk ensured they knew it.

Doran certainly knew it.

She drew back her shoulders, unsure of what to say, mind racing. She didn’t know how to respond to this. Should she play the supportive daughter? The fiery woman? The wise princess?

In the end no words came to her lips. Even though she was distantly aware of some protests, of the darkened mood far below her, even of certain lords and ladies openly displaying their anger, all she could do was stand there and watch her father.

Arianne took another long draw, feeling all of a sudden like a child, and wishing she was down there in the crowd rather than so blatantly under their gaze, seemingly her father’s ally in this queer joke. She steeped subtle away from him, and saw a sad smile bloom and die on his lips. Doran turned away and returned to his seat, his body lowering slowly—almost painfully—upon it.

She had no reason to feel guilty, and yet somehow she did. He looked so…alone.

(He want to disinherit me.)

Doran’s expression smoothed as he watched their people. She had no idea what he was thinking. But then, she never did.

A particularity angry knight of House Uller approached the dais, openly enraged and shouting his protests, but halted in the face of four sharp spears. Arianne, alongside many others, suddenly became aware that a large number of Doran’s Royal Guard that had appeared throughout the room. Areo Hotah came to stand at her father’s right, his massive axe razor sharp, his expression alert and daring. The men stared at each other for a heartbeat before the knight gashed his teeth and turned away. He was immediately welcomed into a large group of like-minded men and women, their individual ire combining and feeding each other until the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. Soon, the room’s volume rose as groups were formed and discussion ran rampant.

The Prince’s expression never changed.

She turned and quickly made her way down to join the rest of the court. Standing up there was unbearable; she must establish that she did not approve of her father’s actions. She passed by the vigilant guards standing before the dias, their numbers now increased to eight. They let her pass without incident before closing rank around the Prince. Arianne payed them no mind, her thought spinning with the need to establish that she did not share her father’s sentiments.

For the next few hours, the princess went around and spoke with her people, hearing their sentiments, their anger, their thoughts. She was fascinated, as always, by their inner lives and the stories they had to share.

The general sentiment was that while everyone was ‘loyal’ to his Grace, his presence was not welcome in the heart of their territory. More than one person made subtle allusions of the dangers of the desert for outsiders, of unquenchable thirst, of scorpion and snakes and poisonous fish. How easy it was, they murmured, to accidentally die in their beautiful land. Just like poor lord Lyonel Tyrell,
who had tried to instil his authority during the—failed—Conquest of Dorne, and had met the Stranger instead.

As for Jon Arryn, while he was unpopular due to his proximity to the throne—a proximity that had once belonged to many members within this room—he had at least returned the bones of many of their slain. That won him tolerance, if nothing else. But it was unlikely Arryn would come, they murmured, for he was the Hand and reportedly the busiest man in Westeros.

Of Eddard Stark, the room was neutral or accepting. While the North was a barbaric land of queer peoples and heathen gods, their Lord was a man few had issue with. He, the room concurred, had rebelled for a just cause: the Dornish could well understand the principle of revenge, and Eddard Stark had fought for a slain father, murdered brother, and kidnapped sister. The Dornish, with their hot blood, would go to war for less.

“Besides, he’s estranged from his Grace,” gruffed Lord Dagos Manwoody. “Stark knows what should have happened when your lady aunt was taken from us. Then there’s that business of betrothing Stark’s bastard to Mad Aerys’s daughter.” Dagos shook his head with a disgusted scowl. “I wouldn’t have done that to my enemy, let alone my ‘friend.’”

Furthermore, many a man in this very room had met lord Stark in the Battle at the Trident. After lord Lyn Corbray smashed the Dornish lines, killed Lewyn Martell, and took some of their commanders captive, he’d wanted blood in his wounded father’s name. Lord Stark had prevented the slaughter of prisoners, ensuring they were treated with dignity. After the battle was lost, it had been lord Stark that helped convince Robert Baratheon to pardon the lords in Rhaegar’s army, even though Dorne had yet to officially bend the knee.

“His Grace got credit for it, but my father tells a different tale,” Ser Ryon Allyrion asserted. “Our father speaks well of him as well,” lady Jennelyn Fowler said. Her twin Jeyne nodded along. “He owes lord Stark a dept. House Fowler has no ill will against House Stark.” House Fowler was second only to House Yorkwood in power and influence, and the surrounding lords and ladies that heard the girl’s claim were quick to nod along and profess their own positive sentiments.

Arianne noted that her cousin, Nymeria Sand—usually the twins’ constant companion—had left soon after the announcement. Arianne expected Obara, who was traveling the land, to appear within the fortnight. The eldest Sand Snake would not be happy, and her anger was loud and violent. She needn’t bother, since it sounded like none of the “esteemed” guests would actually come.

Especially lord Eddard, the only one whose presence few would protest.

“... very reserved, he is,” lady Myria Jordayne shared. “They say the lord of Winterfell rarely leaves his Keep. And for a tourney? No, he looked absolutely miserable during the Tourney at Dragonstone. We have no ore to tempt him, so what reason would he have to venture this far south?”

While making her way around, every once in a while Arianne’s eyes would drift to the isolated figure of her father seated on his throne. He remained aloof, and never once interfered. He wasn’t even trying to mitigate their anger, letting it fester and grow.

News of Dorne’s sentiments would spread beyond their borders like wildfire.

The discussion continued until well after the sun set, the emotions cooling with the day. While lords came and went, Doran Martell never moved. In lieu of dinner, a servant brought him a plate of double peeled tangerines. They had been stripped of both their hard outer shell and their flimsy inner
membrane, and were almost obscene in their nakedness.

The Prince of Dorne devoured them one by one.

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Olenna Tyrell was very adept at noticing details. It was a necessary talent for a habitual liar, and a particularly useful skill for uncovering the deceptions of others. The key to a lie was simplicity, yet a poor liar always created overly elaborate stories, believing that an abundance of detail added more credence to the lie. Except the more information that was available, the easier it was to track the inconsistencies. To notice that something was not quite right.

Liars often invited their own downfalls.

So, when she’d sent two men south to track Eddard Stark’s path, it was because she’d been nagged by a restlessness that whispered of secrets. They’d recovered all the detail she needed to notice.

Initially, her agents followed Eddard’s route south with ease. He’d passed openly though the villages, staying at inns, openly wearing his sigil, and the small folk were quick to recall the band of Northmen. Their accents were not commonplace, and thus easy to remember. During his trek to Dorne, none of the smallfolk recalled a woman or infant in his party, so he must have retrieved Jon Snow some time after.

The problem was that no one could remember seeing him more than once. The timeline of Eddard’s venture south was documented to have occurred during the ninth month, right after he’d lifted the Siege of Storm’s End.

Yet, the dates of his return north was a mystery.

Her men had completely lost his trail after he’d traveled ventured past House Caron, which sat guarding the northern entrance of the Prince’s Pass: the gateway to Dorne. In that queer land, the smallfolk coalesced around the Keeps, with large stretches of unpopulated desert in between. They were frustratingly tight lipped to outsiders in general, and Reachmen in particular.

Eddard’s next recorded appearance was in King’s Landing, four moons later.

“There was a village along the Prince’s path, a few miles north of the Skyreach. If he passed that way on his return north, they would have seen it. However, it’s well was tainted some seven years past, and the people left. Your pardon my lady, but we had no success tracking them down.”

Seven years is a long time. Still, she could not help the displeasure, and didn’t stop her lip from twisting to show it.

The men kept their eyes to the ground, expertly trained.

So then, no one could tell her how long Eddard spent in Dorne, nor where he’d gone, nor the method of his trip back north. All she knew was that sometime within that unknown period, he’d found his sister, returned Dawn to the Daynes, and retrieved Jon Snow. The relative location of the last event was unknown.

Olenna leaned back in her chair, feeling the sun warming her as it penetrated past the ivy-covered gazebo. Flowers and perfume and earth made for a pleasant combination, and she reached out and took one of the small almond cakes and chewed it thoughtfully. Olenna disregarded the spots and agelines on her hand, hidden under long sleeves. It was not yet time to retire, not at all.
Olenna could feel the world stirring with the practice of a woman who kept her ears open. This time, she would seize her opportunity by the throat. Her granddaughter was nearing maturity, and Olenna would mold her into a woman capable of raising their family from the depths. Only when her granddaughter stood above them all would Olenna be satisfied. Until then, age was just an inconsequential number.

Olenna made a motion, and both men bowed and silently left. Alone now but for her silent attendants, she considered the details they’d managed to acquire, and the story as she knew it.

In his quest to free his captured sister, Eddard Stark had been met with Ser Arthur Dayne, Ser Oswell Whent, and Lord Commander Gerold Hightower. Olenna had long found it curious that these three men of the kingsguards had stayed to guard a kidnapped mistress, rather than accompany their prince to the Trident. Unfortunately, dead men told no tales, and all three knights had been slain upon their refusal to relinquish their prince’s prize. The majority of Eddard’s men had fallen, leaving only himself and the lord Howland Reed alive. She assumed he’d returned their bones to their families. Details aside, Eddard had been triumphant in his quest.

Sadly, this is where the tale turned into a tragedy, because the sister that Eddard found was critically ill. Lyanna Stark died soon after being rescued. Olenna allowed herself a moment of pity before moving on.

In the aftermath, Eddard returned the sword Dawn to the Daynes, but she could not assume Eddard had made the trip himself. Perhaps he’d only sent them a raven, and a courier from of Starfall had come to retrieve it. Although, if the rumor that Ashara Dayne was the boy’s mother was true, it stood to reason that Eddard had ventured to Starfall—and left with an infant in tow. Terrible business, to have slain his son’s uncle; perhaps Ashara Dayne had been unwilling to keep the symbol of her brother’s killer.

Olenna’s agents had not dared venture to Starfall to inquire further, lest they found themselves in the stocks. She’d let it go, as she doubted they’d have learned anything even if they had.

A familiar sound of rhythmic wooden tapping reached her, and Olenna focused on the garden path to see her grandson Willas slowly hobbling over. He was leaning heavily on his cane in a way that meant his right leg was particularly paining him this day. The bone had been broken in eight places when his horse fell on him, and the maester had not been able to do more than wrap it up tightly and hope for the best. Little good that had done. Her thoughts slipped away at the distraction, and she scowled at the accursed leg while damning the man who’d done it.

“Burn in the seven hells, you miserable snake,” she muttered, gaze fixed on his leg.

“Good afternoon to you as well, grandmother,” Willas said mildly, well used to this greeting. He lowered himself painfully onto the already pulled back chair to her left. He released a silent sigh when he was finally seated, and carefully placed his cane behind the chair, always within reach. She took another swallow, the wine made bitter.

Olenna waved an cutting hand and a servant instantly appeared at Willas’s side, bearing a tray holding an empty glass and a pitcher of his favourite red. Dornish red, no doubt a recommendation from the stupid boy’s slithering friend. Truly, all the men in this family were idiots—even the bookish one. Another servant appeared with a plate of his favoured sweets—a collection of small tarts of sour cherries, raspberries, and strawberries—and silently placed it by his right arm. Their tasks done, they disappeared without a sound.

Willas reached out and plucked a desert from the tray, not showing a bit of surprise at her presence or preparedness. Olenna had learned from his reluctant valet that today Willas planned to take his daily
two-hour break in the gardens, and had set up camp to lay in wait. He was the type to avoid having company, but Olenna had long ignored his petty protests and devised methods to ensure he couldn’t avoid her. She enjoyed these quaint family moments with her eldest grandson. He was not tedious like his father, nor annoying like his brothers, so she tolerated him. Perhaps Margaery would come back early from her afternoon ride and join them.

“Who were those men, grandmother? They claimed to be here at your behest.”

So much for tolerable. Her agents had just happened to return at this time, and she’d summoned them here as she’d been too lazy to move and too impatient to hear their long anticipated report. But now Willas had seen them and grown curious; he wouldn’t let this go. That part of him was annoying.

“Are you an infant?” she snipped, taking a long draw, her irritation swarming like locusts to the harvest. “When I am on my death bed, will you expect me to hold your hand and use my final breath to feed you information? You’re the heir, the gods decided, show some damned initiative. Question them yourself.”

“I have your leave to investigate it, then?” he murmured, smiling pleasantly. “Is it something so tedious that you don’t want to waste your breath, or something so important that you assume, due to your dismissal, that I’ll assume it tedious—and thus not bother inquiring?”

Olenna’s lip twitched with an odd desire to simultaneously smile and grimace. By the gods the boy was clever. Now if only she could find him a suitable wife, preferably one smart enough to match his wits yet not too smart as to try and control him. If the girl could manage to ruffle his unnaturally starched feathers, then all the better.

She cleared her throat, offensively loud, with a scoff. “Do shut up, Willas. I’ve things on my mind.”

“Of course, grandmother. My apologies.” Willas pushed his hair back out of his eyes, and took out a book from his coat. Donning a pair of spectacles—another deformity—he opened it to a marked page. She watch him tuck the small piece of embroidered leather he used as a place holder at the end, noting it to be one of Margaery’s early works.

She hid her smile by taking another slip of wine.

Olenna allowed her eyes to slip shut as she relaxed back, using the quiet and warmth to focus her thoughts. Eddard Stark and his odd story. The details were too vague to conclude anything, but they still nudged at her. She focused on the oddities that bothered her, meticulously organizing them.

First, there was the bastard boy with a familiar face. Talented, despite his youth, at both sword and bow. Betrothed to the Targaryen girl, and thus interesting for many reasons. And to many people.

Second, a deserted village being the only clue of Ned Stark’s movements. A tainted well, was it? An rare story in a land that guarded their water more zealously than gold. Olenna have to review what event, exactly, had occurred in Jon Snow’s life seven year’s prior.

Third, the discrepancy of Eddard’s behaviour. He’d left so blatant a trail while going south, and yet apparently concealed himself while going north? If he had ridden back north, then why had he avoided the main roads and villages on the way to King’s Landing? Could he have taken a ship from Starfall, even knowing he would have to traverse half the continent and the pirate-riddled Stepstones of the postwar era? It would be futile to send men to the any eastern docks to inquire after a couple of Northmen—who may or may not have been in the company of a woman and infant—some ten years back.
Fourth, the thing that truly nagged her: Lyanna Stark’s story. Which illness had taken her, exactly? Not a contagious one, but deadly enough to kill? And why would three men of the kingsguard decide to act as caretakers to a dying mistress, even with their prince already died. Perhaps as last wish? Or had they just not heard? But then, Eddard would have told them upon their meeting, so why had they continued to keep the girl captive, rather than bending the knee or fleeing in search of young Viserys? What draw would a woman kidnapped in lust have for three Targaryen loyalists…?

There was a nagging suspicious at the back of her mind, one that could explain everything. It was a shadowed thought, impossible to prove, but…entertaining to consider. Daeron Targaryen and Jon Snow share a sticking resemblance, and yet no Stark had ever wed a Targaryen. Olenna knew of one ‘illness’ that had claimed many a young woman. Knew of one draw for three kingsguards.

Of one secret worth the price of a man’s honor.

*How very interesting, lord Stark...I cannot decide whether or not this would be characteristic of you. Family or honor: which do you value more?*

Olenna knew were she herself stood on that account. Perhaps she and Eddard Stark had something in common.

She turned her focus from the secret to its potential aftermath. Even if her suspicion were true—a large *if*—the real question was: did it matter in the *slightest*?

A moment of pause, before her mind supplied the answer: no.

From a practical standpoint, it really meant nothing.

In fact, if this farce was made public, then all it would evoke was rage. The realm had bled long and hard during the Rebellion, had lost brothers and sons and husbands to right a grievous wrong. To know the spark had been a lie would be a painful blow. If anyone dared to use it as an excuse to *peruse a claim*, it would only lead to more blood. The realm would need to be fractured, desperate, and swamped in chaos for such a shaky candidate to *ever* garner momentum.

Even with that absurdly difficult require met, the claimant would need an army—a large, powerful, loyal army. And gold enough to fund it. The only source of men willing to fight for this cause were sellswords; foreigners. Discounting the difficulty of conquest, even if a candidate seized the throne by force, so what? Would they even be able to *keep* it? When his gold ran out, and his mercenary army deserted him, the lords would swarm and drag the self-declared king from his meaningless chair. If the people refused to pay taxes, then he would need to continuously sack the kingdoms if he wanted to retain his foreign swords. And *that* would only incite violent rebellion.

A foreign army could take the Iron Throne, but they couldn’t keep it. Not without fire breathing monsters.

The presence of internal support was thus a necessity. The problem was, no lord of Westeros would ever *contemplate* gambling on a claimant that didn’t have some proof of paternity. Even something as basic as the Targaryen looks. Without that, the opposition would be unending, and would invite opportunistic fools putting forth their own candidates while decrying all others as frauds. But beyond paternity was something far more importantly: legitimacy. While Olenna personally thought the widespread hatred of bastards was excessive, she would never say so publicly. Westeros was very simple in some cases, the smallfolk especially: What the gods decried, humans must loath.

And to the gods, marriage was the most sacred institution.
Idly, Olenna recalled the very public knowledge of Rhaegar Targaryn’s lust for Lyanna Stark, and briefly entertained the idea of some secret, sordid love affair. A pretty prince declaring his love would sway many a stupid girl, and lots of families would claim kidnapping to cover up a daughter’s elopement and thus keep her eligible for marriage. However, even if some trite little romantic ‘wedding’ had taken place between dragon and wolf, it meant nothing. A prince’s marriage was not binding without the presence of the king, the High Septon, and a dozen credible witnesses. Even then, it could be annulled until the Grand Maester declared before the court that the bedding had been completed.

Of course, in times of war, rules could be bent…and lust had a way of making even the most upright man lose his senses completely. The problem was, a polygamous marriage could only be enforced by the king, and Rhaegar never ascended the throne. As such, any child he sired outside of the marriage bed was bastard-born. In the eyes of the people, Elia Martell was and would always be his only wife.

The only man who could have contested otherwise died at the Trident.

No one of sense would ever try to use a possible son of his to claim the throne.

And yet…Olenna took a long, considering sip. Ned Stark is so suddenly building his strength…and his navy. Jon Snow, with his moss, a very desirable resource that was given to him by Howland Reed—who went south with Eddard. The Martells, who have not forgiven Elia’s murder, took the boy to foster. Then, there’s Stannis Baratheon, who loves his Targaryen ward enough to, Olenna suspected, help depose a Queen. The same Stannis Baratheon who very publicly exhibited his new ore…and who recently formed a contract with the North.

All together, the were generating more than enough gold…to fund an army.

Olenna let out a loud, incredulous laugh. She snapped her eyes open, and found Willas staring at her. She thrust out a quelling hand when his mouth opened to inquire.

“More wine,” she snapped, holding out the goblet. Her fingers where white where they clenched around it. “Hurry up!”

The servant that had appeared at her side jumped, growing openly frazzled as he rushed to pour the wine. A few drops spilled over, running down the pitcher, and the bedecked man seemed as if he would cry. He rambled a long list of apologies, thought she heard none of them, and swiftly used a cloth to whip the tiny spill

“Oh, enough, enough! Leave.”

Olenna focused on cup and drank the whole thing in a few deep swallows. She regretted being unable to savour the richness, too eager to wash her absurd thoughts away.

Finishing, she slammed the glass down with a harsh exhale, then both it and her thoughts away. By the Crone, she’d gone way too far down that rabbit hole, following one absurd contemplation after another.

She’d gotten to the point of actually entertaining delusions.

Olenna was confident in her assessments, and men of unbreakable honor and unyielding justice did not make for good conspirators. Eddard Stark and Stannis Baratheon would not even entertain the thought.

“It’s the senility,” she claimed to her grandson, who was studying her with concern. “It gets to me at times. Hush and have some respect for an old woman of doddering whits. The death bed, Willas, I
can see it coming."

A very long pause, before Willas slowly said, “I’ve no doubt that you’ll outlive us all, grandmother.”

If she wished to do that, she’d have to avoid stupidity.

Sternly dismissing the ridiculous thoughts, she leaned back and examined the most common explanation for such a secret. The one that was so obvious as to be dull.

Eddard would seek to protect the boy.

Nothing more, nothing less. When there were several explanations for a phenomena, the simplest answer was usually the truth. Her maester had told her something like that, in her girlhood lessons. *Start looking for plots in every shadow, Olenna Redwyne, and you’ll drive yourself mad.*

She would look into Jon Snow a bit more, try to see if her absurd speculations proved to have any practical merit. Maybe search for impossible proof, so that she could make use of it if the time ever came.

*In the meanwhile, it wouldn’t hurt to collect information about the North movement...or keep track of the Martells...or investigate just what foreign business Stannis Baratheon is conducting.*

It did not hurt to be informed.

*****

The Lady Anaris was born a Qorgyle, the youngest child and only daughter of the Lord of Sandstone. In sharp contrast to the rest of her family, Anaris did not react to events, she focused on analyzing the cause and effect. She’d long been fascinated with that antecedents of control: if she could understand how things came to be and what consequences they’d have, then she could control the events of her own life. Anaris found that she couldn’t tolerate the unknown, and thus planned every minute of her coming days, weeks, and sometimes months in excruciating detail.

Perhaps as a consequence, she’d developed into a no-nonsense, matter-of-fact kind of woman. In her youth, she’d been troubled by her inability to properly express her sentiments, and how her words always seemed to come out with an unintended harshness. Due to that, and her ability to fit her emotions into neat little boxes, she’d never quite fit into Dornish society. Her three elder brothers had thus accused her of being too cold for Dorne.

Of course, those same brothers were also quick to come to her for solutions to the ridiculous troubles they’d get themselves into, because Anaris was very good at solving problems. She liked management, and in her experience most people were perfectly comfortable being dependent as long as it wasn’t advertised as such. Independence and control were pretty ideas, but people were lazy and loved letting someone else be in charge. Anaris enjoyed being that person—she wanted that control. And she was so very good at it.

When she’d married the lord Vorian Dayne and had three children, Anaris was convinced that her philosophy was true. Vorian was a merry man with plans and ideas but little patience for the details needed to enact them. As such, he amassed mountains of unfinished projects, and it was Anaris that dealt with the individuals he’d consequently infuriated. It had saved her husband many duels over the years, and she was not above smugness whenever he ardently showed his appreciation.

Aedion, while taking after his father in terms of grand ideas, thankfully took after her in patience. He was the child she least needed to manage, because Anaris had been exceedingly careful in how her
eldest was raised—a task the impatient Vorian had been all to happy to relinquish. Aidion had grown with full awareness of the burden of his position, and the consequences of his actions. As such, he’d become an ambitious but down to earth man. When handling her eldest, Anaris only needed to occasionally review Aedion’s latest venture and rework—or halt—any overly ambitious plot. Such a thing had only happened twice in his lifetime.

It was her second child’s disposition that burdened her. Arthur took after her almost completely in terms of patience and planning, developing an absolute hatred for uncertainty. He had a keen mind and the tenacity to chase his goals to the bitter end. He proved this when, at five years old, he’s stacked chairs in the dead of night and climbed up the hearth to touch Dawn for the very first time. He’d then appeared at his parent’s bedside and declared the ancestral sword would be his. He’d worked tirelessly every day since with a zeal unseen in any other child until he’d finally been named the youngest Sword of the Morning in history. He was a genius at the sword, true, but one honed by dedication.

However, while Arthur’s single-mindedness made him a man adapt at mastering skills, it also made him an exceedingly difficult child. To him, a decision made was a decision dismissed—as in, never to be revised. To his credit, he was exceedingly thorough in his judgments, but unfortunately for her, he’d decided very early on that most people were annoying and worthless. Thus, to Arthur Dayne any interaction lacking a goal became a tedious task to be avoided. It made him seem dedicated and serious to the world at large, and frustrating to those that personally knew him. To manage Arthur Dayne, one must know him very, very well.

As Ashara, six years Arthur’s junior and her parents’ open favourite, she was by far the easiest child of the three. Born with an unwavering optimism, a distinct lack of materialistic greed, and blessed with a charm such that a genuine smile could win the favor of even her critical brother, she’d never known a stormy day. Ashara had lived in a dream: she had a family who adored her, a beauty unsurpassed, a status envied by all in a culture that fed her vivacity…

She’d also been blessed with the love of the one dearest to her.

Anaris had been so preoccupied with Aedion and so challenged by Arthur, that her sweet Ashara become the one Anaris allowed herself to spoil. Furthermore, due to Ashara’s perfect willingness to yield to her mother’s plans—which had, miraculously, aligned perfectly with both their desires—she’d never once faced the burden of fighting for her happiness. As such, she’d never doubted her idealistic future.

And why she hadn’t been able to bare the aftermath of the dream.

I should have curbed her. Anaris felt such impotent anger whenever she remembered how she’d failed her daughter. I gave her everything, never cautioning her joy, never letting her taste the consequences of a choice. Feeding her expectations, encouraging her optimism! My greatest mistake. She would still be here if I had not…not…!

…played a winnerless game.

She’d lost then, and she was losing now. In the end, it was she who became a puppet in another’s scheme, the control she so valued ripped from her. Now, every step she walked was in uncertainty, a looming fear shadowing her days and haunting her nights.

I have not slept well in months.

Anaris Dayne could be forgiven, then, for being unable to control her anger in the presence of this boy. It was not his fault, she knew that well. Year ago, Anaris herself had intended to lie about his
birth, going so far as to say that her wet-nurse, Wylla, was his mother. Eddard Stark would never tell a soul, so even when news of the betrothal reached Starfall she had not been overly concerned.

She should have looked for enemies closer to home.

Now, as if to spit on her once more, her daughter had been resurrected in shame. Ashara had become a tool from beyond the grave, wielded to hurt them. A schemer’s lot was to be punished for her greed.

A child’s lot was to atone for his father’s sins. This boy, whose conception was a scheme and whose birth punctuated in tragedy, was intended to be a pawn. One to erase and then make use of.

Did Oberyn know? Was he such a man as to give condolences with a liar’s smile? Was he playing at caring for this boy, while very pointedly offering him to her on a silver platter?

You grew with him at the Water Gardens, Aedion: was he a man of petty cruelties?

There was no one left to answer.

“Do you know what it means to take your own life?” Anaris asked, her voice made harsh.

She didn’t turn around in the ensuing silence. She knew Allyria had cringed back—part shock, part embarrassment—but had no idea what Jon Snow’s reaction was. Anaris would only speak of this once, for she could no longer say Ashara’s name without anger, so it was best that they were both here.

Since they all knew the nature of this interaction, it was pointless to pretend it would be a pleasant one. With a breath, Anaris tipped her head back and stared at Dawn, which was mounted high upon the dead hearth. It was a shinning blade of crafted moonlight, sealed within an ornate cage. The dull gem at its pommel was the only hint of colour. She focused on that bit of red with all her might.

“No, my lady,” Jon finally answered an eon later, completely solemn. The very sound shriveled her heart. Years ago, Eddard Stark had bid Ashara farewell with that very accent. She could barely stand it.

Almost twelve years. Would it be easier if I could just forget?

When she didn’t respond, throat too tight, he haltingly continued. “All I know of the subject comes from a nurse at Winterfell. She used to say that in the dead of winters, when the food grew low, the elders would sometimes…take their own lives. So their grandchildren could survive.” He cleared his throat, voice nearly disappearing. “I know it’s not…the same thing.”

“It is not.” Ashara had not thought of anyone but herself, or she would have never…!

(Why didn’t you come to me…you selfish girl.)

“Mother,” Allyria protested, an undertone of steel. Protective, already. Allyria was very good at getting attached, and since she’d learned the truth she’d been preparing herself to be this child’s knight. Anaris would not make the same mistake twice, and so Allyria needed to know the stakes. Unlike Edric, she was remaining in Dorne. In her usual manner, she responded to guilt with optimism—while Anaris turned hers into anger.

She finally turned, steeling herself.

Jon’s eyes were intently fixed on Dawn, but it was neither awe nor lust in them; he looked almost ill.
Upon her turn, he immediately snapped to focus. The children stood close, with Allyria a step in front, and both were tanned from the Summer sun. He was a slim boy, barely taller than Allyria, with shoulder-length black hair held back in a low bun and serious gray eyes. He was watching her attentively, patient and silent, and despite his awkward stumbling words, his posture was straight. Whatever expression shadowed her face made the boy dip his gaze away, but Anaris could allow herself nothing else.

If she softened, it would be a betrayal, and she wouldn’t be able to finish this.

*I will not pretend to love him. That would make the lie too cruel.*

“Suicide,” she said, forcing the word into stark clarity, “is synonymous with shame.”

Allyria knew that, for all she had been protected, so she hunched her shoulders but didn’t play at shocked. The servants whispered it, the villagers talked, but it was never spoken of openly. They would not dare. Still, the girl had no doubt heard bits and pieces, and knew well how Anaris refused to speak of Ashara. Allyra was also very aware than unlike their peers, neither she nor Edric had grown up playing in the Water Gardens.

Both of them were focused Jon Snow’s reaction. Allyria stepped hesitantly closer, offering support. Anaris stayed were she was, well away from them, and watched the grimness overshadow his features.

He tipped his chin back, a quiet acceptance underlined with challenge. “Your pardon, my lady…but so is bastard.”

Anaris studied him. *Well then.*

Allyria sent him a startled look, realizing at the same time that the sad boy she’d expected was not one to need a champion. Jon kept his focus on Anaris, his emotions shadowed behind gray steel. This was not a boy to want pity. Not a victim to whine.

She took note of how he subtly leaned away from Allyria, uncomfortable at her hovering. The girl noticed and quickly stepped away, cheeks reddening.

Anaris exhaled, keeping herself ruthlessly interpersonal: a historian gazing from the outside. “I’m sure your maester told you the tale of Queen Nymeria and her ten thousand ships.”

The children gave matching frowns, both taken aback. “Ah—yes, my lady.”

“An odd story, when you think about it: an entire peoples choosing to exile themselves rather than become a Valyrian colony. Submission would have been easier, and rewarding enough for the rich—but such a thing was the height of taboo. Instead, for two hundred and fifty years the Rhoynish Wars raged, with hundreds of thousands of casualties. Finally, the Valyrians decided that they were a mad people who would never cease fighting, and sent not men, but dragons to end things. A battalion of three hundreds, their wings blocking out the sun.

“Princess Nymeria was the last royal, and knowing there was no victory left in Essos, she took her ten thousand ships and decided to crush the Andals instead. She replaced an impossible war with a possible one; coming to Westeros not as refugees, but conquerors. Even seeped in misery, facing death or slavery, with most of their people butchered…they still chose to fight. Do you know why?”

They shook their heads, riveted yet wary.

“The Rhoynar worship the Mother Rhoyne, goddess of the river. Sex, glory, freedom, and happiness
were the tenants of their religion. They believed that those acts would purify their souls so that in the afterlife they could become a part of the Mother. They called her a merciful goddess, because she let them be reborn again and again until they finally reached that purity. But if a man spits on her gift by taking his own life… then the goddess casts his soul to the earth, cursing him to an eternity of suffering.”

Anaris had gained an obsession with the old stories after Ashara’s death. She needed to understand why the men and women she’d once called friend were suddenly treating her like a pariah. Why so many servants had left. Why it was only their access to water and trade that drew others to her, and why her gold was now accepted with reluctance.

That was the first time she’d hated her homeland.

Anaris released a sharp exhale, the bitterness an old companion, and realized both children were staring. She did not know what her face had betrayed.

Ruthlessly chilling her tone, she barreled forward.

“While we no longer follow the old ways, they have shaped Dorne greatly. We are, as in everything else, more passionate. I cannot speak for your old gods, but in the upper kingdoms suicide is a sandal most Houses go to great lengths to avoid. Since the Silent Sisters refuse to touch a body that has angered the Stranger, the deceased cannot be put to rest in the family crypts.” Only the sisters knew how to prepare the body; only they were allowed to. “The same is true in Dorne, but the scandal is harsher. The Rhoynar dug their roots in deep, and the Dornish do not surrender. That is our pride.”

She could not deliver the last word through anything but clenched teeth. Once, she had reveled in that truth—crowed over that glory—yet now it seemed like a barbed collar. You could not be weak in Dorne.

A craven is an abomination.

The warrior-priests that guarded the Towers of Light existed to ensure that only a pure body was laid to rest.

I considered not letting the Tower have my Aedion…but I was too weak to bear it.

“Ashara surrendered, and they will judge her child for it.” She did not sugar coat, and she did not soften it, for he would be faced with it soon enough. As the news spread, so would the contempt.

There was a reason Aedion had been wed to a sickly little girl from from a tiny House. Why Edric and Allyria must settle for a marcher lord of the Stomlands. House Dayne, who held dominion over the Torrentine River, had fallen so far as to need Beric Dondarrion.

You do not want to join this family, Jon Snow. We’re hanging by a thread.

As if hearing her thoughts, a bitter smile bloomed on his lips and he nodded. Once.

“I understand.” He was not surprised at the cruelty, and Anaris supposed she should have expected as much from a bastard raised outside of Dorne. And yet, the next instant he seemed to crumble. He bowed his head, face hidden, and fists clenched upon his thighs. “I am… grateful for the warning. My lady.”

And despite the pain she heard, his thanks was genuine.

She knew then that had she been allowed to claim him as Wylla’s son, she would have been
personally invested in overseeing his growth. But Ashara’s resurrected shade was too fresh—too painful. Maybe after some time had passed. After the news and spread and she’d dealt with the backlash all over again, maybe then she could…

Teach this child what it meant to be Dornish. How to survive.

How to be a Dayne.

But the rest of her wanted nothing to do with him.

“The prince knew,” Jon said, still not looking up. In fact he bent even lower, his voice a painful, hollow thing, the words torn out. “He knew. Yet he told me that—but no.” A joyless laugh. “No, all he said was that Dorne is fair to bastards…and Oberyn never lies.”

Watching his young body hunch, a fine treble developing, she realized that whatever else Oberyn Martell was, he’d been genuinely good to this boy. So much so that it was Oberyn that hurt him, not the situation itself.

Just when Anaris decided to do Jon a kindness, Allyra beat her to it. “The prince took you to squire!”

Jon stilled, but didn’t look up.

“Has that changed in this last day?” the girl persisted, latching onto a chance to finally be of help. “After you learned the truth? Has he changed?”

A slow, hesitant shake of his head.

“Well, then obviously he doesn’t care,” she declared, perhaps prematurely, but earnestly. Allyria hesitantly put her own hand on his, awkwardly patting twice. “Everyone loves prince Oberyn, so being his squire will help you. He wants to help you.”

Jon only swallowed, but didn’t reject the words. Anaris added her agreement much more briskly.

“Whatever else Oberyn Martell is, he is not a man to submit to anything—not even his own people. His support will make your situation…unique. Better. He’s given you the chance to prove yourself; staked his own reputation on your success. So prove that Ashara’s…failings—” she clenched her teeth “—are not present in her son.”

“It’s not a failing to feel,” he whispered. Allyra looked away. Anaris ignored him.

“Don’t give them a chance to make up their minds from afar. Prove yourself strong.”

He finally looking up, his eyes were a tad red, but dry. “Some people don’t change their minds.”

Anaris dismissed that with a roll of her eyes. “Don’t waste time on idiots.”

For some reason, that seemed to amuse him enough to warrant a brief smile.

The moment of levity passed, and he leaned forward soberly.

“My lady, if I may ask…”

She lifted her head, waiting.

“I’ve seen the Star Hall but…there are no paintings of—and I was hoping…”
Anaris didn’t let him finish. She’d come prepared, and reached into her pocket and took out a locket the size of her palm. She all but thrust it at him, turning away when he fumbled, sick to her stomach. Allyria surged forward at once, all but climbing on him to catch her first glimpse of Ashara.

Jon flinched away, but nevertheless held it between the two of them. Together, they hunched over the miniature portrait, staring at it for a very long time. The silence was heavy with ghosts, and Allyria’s eyes grew moist. Jon’s inhale was shaky.

Anaris turned away. Mentally, she focused on organizing her week to account for the time she’d need to deal with the aftermath of this conversation. She swapped events around and debated which way to best maximize her time. If she reviewed the budget before lunch, the walk to the dinning room would be a lot shorter than if she did so before her daily ride. Besides, the maester was always on about the importance of physical exertion occurring after a meal.

“Did she love my father? Before he—”

“No,” she said truthful, too unprepared for the question to lie. As soon as it really penetrated just who was asking—or who he thought he was—she jerked her gaze to his in time to see the hope in those gray eyes disappear. Regret blooming, she hastened to soften it. “That is, she did care for him, in her way, just not—”

“That’s a lie!” Allyria shouted. They both turned to her, startled by the vehemence. “Ashara loved him, I know it. Wylla said so!”

Anaris drew back, “Allyria—”

“She did,” the girl insisted, eyes red. “That’s why she—had Jon. I know she must have loved him or else why—” She swallowed. “Why can’t we just tell the truth?”

“Allyria!”

“It’s alright, my lady,” Jon said to her, hesitant. “I can accept it even if—”

Allyria turned to him with a heated glare, “Ashara loved him. Mother just can’t accept that she’s gone. She refuses to even speak of—”

“That is enough, Allyria!”

How dare Wylla fill her head with these lies? If Anaris had know she’d believed such a thing, she’d have corrected her long ago.

How...since you do refuse to speak of her?

“You’re a liar,” the girl accursed, shaking her head. The tears gathered and fell.

Frustrated, Anaris snapped out, “Ashara loved the same person since she was a girl. I know my own daughter!”

Allyria jerked back as if physical hit, eyes blown wide. Jon shrank back into the couch, blatantly uncomfortable.

Allyria burst into tears, surged to her feet, and ran out the room. Anaris stared after her, frozen.

What in the world...?

The silence grew increasingly awkward until Jon finally cleared his throat. “I did not expect her to—”
that is, I know what happened between my father and ser Arthur, and that you may resent us but I —"

“Do not presume to know what I feel,” she briskly interrupt, meeting his gaze coldly. “Arthur was my son, and I knew him well; he doesn’t want your guilt, and I don’t need it.”

Of that matter, she would say nothing else.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

The silence stretched again, the seconds growing painful with unspoken words. They both knew what he really wanted to ask, the question burning his tongue.

Anaris finally jerked to her feet and reached into her pocket. She hesitated for a very long moment before tossing a thin journal onto the seat beside him. She didn’t wait around to see his reaction, making her way to door.

She needed to leave. She felt the air thinning. Her dress was too tight.

“Wait! My lady, please, I—”

She didn’t turn; she didn’t have to. “Nothing could have kept her here. Nothing. Not even the child she loved. She’d lost…too much.”

Anaris strode out the door, head held high, her destination clear.

His voice came from a distance, that painful northern accent. “The locket—”

“Keep it.”

Anaris did not need it to remember her daughter’s face. She saw those haunted eyes in her every nightmare.

She found herself in a tiny courtyard hidden behind tall, ivory walls and a thick, dark door. The only key on a chain around her neck, the weight a constant burden against her chest.

The sun had trouble getting to this place, it was too narrow, to closed off. Unless it was high noon, the entire area was shrouded in shadow. It was so cold here. Anaris hated it with every fiber of her being.

She pushed the door shut behind her, leaving her trapped in this shameful place. Her only companion was a sapling of bleached white bark and blood red leaves. Ten years old and faceless. Every time she came here, Anaris preyed to find the tree had died. That it had never existed in the first place.

Yet every time, it was just a bit bigger, and she was glad.

Ashara claimed to have taken the cutting from the Isle of Faces, openly admitted her trespass, and saying only that the place was creepy. She had somehow gotten it into her head that her child would need a weirwood, and she’d carried the branch all the way home in her dirt-filled saddle bag.

Ashara did whatever was needed to get what she wanted. Anaris missed those mind-numbing plots the most.

“Who is he?” Anaris demanded, storming into the room, diary in hand. She waved it through the
air, affronted beyond belief. This was just like her daughter! Her beauty was matched only by her willfulness!

The girl had been sitting at her vanity, humming as she pulled a glass brush through her long, shimmering hair. At her mother’s intrusion, she faltered half way through a stroke and met the elder woman’s gaze through the mirror. She zeroed in on the diary, and her haunting violet eyes grew wide.

She gasped and whipped around, wincing in pain as the forgotten brush was torn out, ripping off strands. One hand holding her injured head, and the other holding the brush, Ashara Dayne brandished the tool like a weapon and pointed it at her mother, accusing, “I knew you still read it! I knew it!”

“You damned girl, tell me this instant!”

“There is no privacy in this family,” Ashara ranted, waving the brush just like her mother was waving the diary. “No privacy! I knew I wasn’t being paranoid by not mentioning his name, I knew it!”

Anaris strode forward, smacking the girl on the head with the book, although it was blocked by a quick arm, and then slammed it down on the table, rattling the collection of perfumes, rouges, creams, powders, and jewels. She ripped open the diary so forcefully that Ashara gasped and tried to snatch it away, worried it would be destroyed. Anaris testily smacked her daughter’s hand, ignoring the hiss, and slammed her finger on the entry dated just over two months ago—five weeks before Ashara had come home.

She had claimed to have quarreled horribly with Elia, and had thus been unable to bare Dragonstone a moment longer. Anaris had been suspicious, because those girls fought like a volcano meeting the sea: boiling and cooling rabidly. But with what was apparently happening at King’s Landing, with King Aryes’s progressing madness, she’d feared soon he’d execute something truly important and spark a war. Knowing how volatile the situation was, she’d been grateful to have her daughter home and hadn’t questioned it for long.

I should have known!

Her nail dug into the paper and, voice scathing, read: “‘In truth, my real purpose for this entry—so as to avoid directly seeing the pain I’ve caused you—’” Anrais broke off to glare at her daughter, who flinched. “—is to tell you that I’ve succeeded. It seems that Northern seed is a virile as it looks, so my trip was fruitful and I can finally return. He’ll never know, of course: This babe will be mine alone. Be happy for me, Elia—I know it is so very different than what we discussed, but he’s too set on that wolf girl to—”

Ashara finally succeeded in pushing her mothers hand away snatched the diary, glaring as she held it close to her breast. She placed her right hand over her belly protectively. For a moment there was a sadness in her as she blinked at her mother, but she cleared her throat and haughtily turned away. “Well, what more do you need to know? I wrote it very clearly: ‘mine alone.’”

“Like the hells it will be!” Arnais snapped. “Tell me right now you ungrateful child or I will have you flogged!”

Ashara huffed in dismissal, not meeting her mothers eyes. “You know that threat lost it’s potency years ago. As is the case when you never follow through.”

“This time I just might,” Anaris hissed.
“So do it,” she infuriating girl challenged. “We both know you won’t.” A brief pause. “Not even Arthur could push you that far.”

“Not even Arthur purposefully spit on everything I planned for him!”

“Only because he wanted to join the kingsguard,” the girl casually pointed out.

“And you see how he’s matured?” Anaris insisted. “The realm calls him the perfect knight.”

Ashara rolled her eyes. “My grumpy brother, ‘perfect.’ I should love to tell them about the time he got his clothes stolen while out for a swim. Do you remember, mother? He rode all the way home wearing only his horse’s blanket, and got such a terrible sunburn he looked like a red pepper.”

Anaris couldn’t help recalling her flushed, disheveled son padding up the stairs, trailing dried sand and wearing only a blanket around his waist, and a pinched frown on his face. It took her husband days to stop laughing in Arthur’s presence.

“That idiot boy,” she fondly said. It had been over a decade since then, and that same idiot boy was now a kingsguard. Gods help the realm.

“Arthur still hates the company of others, even after all these years. It’s why he and the serpent get on so well—they can be miserable together,” Ashara sniffed, her form relaxing as she resumed brushing her hair.

Anaris startled, and then narrowed her eyes. The crafty girl had almost succeeded in distracting her. She adopted sad frown. “For all his bad-tempered ways, your brother has never broken my heart. Must you do so, Ashara? Tell me who the father is.”

The girl glared, seeing through the thinly veiled manipulation. She’d learned from the best, after all. “Break your heart?” she scoffed. “Try another tactic, mother. This is Dorne, last I recalled. I’m not the first girl to have a natural born child, nor the last. It may be more hushed than when the men do it, but we both know you don’t really care.” Then she smiled, smug. “Of course, those in the upper kingdoms certainly do. I’m practicality unmarriageable now, and those boastful boors will finally leave me in peace. I know that’s what you’re really mad about.”

Anaris hissed in a breath, nearly seeing red. Only her daughter was so blithely unconcerned about the opinions of others! “Of all the schemes over the years, this one leaves me genuinely speechless!”

“If only that were true,” Ashara muttered.

Her mother whipped around and began to pace, so frustrated that if she didn’t expel this energy she may do or say something she would regret. Ashara pointedly ignored the figure she glimpse pacing in the mirror.

Anaris took in a slow breath. “‘Northern seed,’ was it? Oh course you’d choose one of that backwards lot, since they stay as far from King’s Landing as possible. You thought that even if I founf out, I’d hesitate to tell the family since you know how much I scorn those barbarians.”

“Stop calling them that!” Ashara spat. This was an argument they’d had often. Much as Ashara loved her home, she didn’t see it as being inherently above the other kingdoms. But then, Anaris had never ventured out of her beloved sands, and she scorned any people that declared women were unfit to rule. “Your grandchild will share that blood, I tell you!”

Anaris waved the words away. “The child will be a Dayne. Good Dornish blood will fix any weakness of character.” Then she smirked. “But thank you for the confirmation.”
Ashara gasped and drew herself back, mouth twisting in anger when she realized her mistake. She cursed, blind to her mother’s reproachful glare.

“So,” Anaris continued, resuming her pacing, calmer now. “Most likely, you met him during a tourney.” Ashara stiffened for a second, before relaxing and meeting her mother’s gaze with insolent boredom.

“I’ll guess…Harrenhal.” Another telltale flinch. Anaris smirked again—her daughter really was too easy to see through. “The Starks and some of their bannermen ventured south for it. Let’s see; knowing you and your vanity—”

“Mother!” Ashara protested, scowling.

“—it would be a highborn man, not an attendant or servant. Considering the rumors, which I’d dismissed before, you succeed in getting someone in your bed. Although, if you planned this so far back, his seed must not have taken root.”

Ashara remained mute, the only motion being her brush through her hair, a long pull that parted the wavy strands, now a savage act. She was seated in her nightdress, since Anaris had come during the time the castle usually retired. She’d had a servant follow Ashara, because the girl was predictable in that she wrote in her diary before bed and then hid it somewhere in the keep. She’d long learned her room wasn’t a safe hiding spot, although Anaris had no qualms about invading her privacy considering all the stupid plots she’d stopped over the years.

Once, Ashara had almost convinced Elia to abscond to Lys to visit the exiled Oberyn. Thankfully, those girls made a habit of writing everything down, so they could exchange diaries later and compare notes.

Anaris signed, pinching the bridge of her nose. Her anger was fading and leaving a headache in its place. “Tell me, Ashara.”

She jerked the brush down, frustrated. “Oh, what does it matter, mother? I’ve already told you I will not wed, much as you scheme to push me towards any man with a bit of power. I don’t want that life and you know it. I’ll be by Elia’s side and that’s more than enough. She may have been forced into wedding that serpent, but you can’t force me to wed anyone.” She placed a hand on her belly and smiled softly. “Never.”

“You’re a naive girl of twenty-two!” Anaris snapped. The damned child would drive her mad! “What you want today won’t even resemble what you want in five, ten, twenty years! It may seem like an easy choice now, but only because you’re too young to know what you’re sacrificing. Do not close this path to yourself without at least considering it more carefully!”

Ashara paused in her motion, staring at herself in the mirror. She turned towards her mother, and her eyes were sober and earnest. “I have considered it. I want this child. I’m sure about that, and sure about which life I want; which person. Ten, twenty, a hundred years won’t change that.” She smiled, dry. “I was cursed with your stubbornness, as you’ve always said.”

Anaris drew herself up, refusing to be softened by the argument. “Desire and marriage are very different things, daughter mine. You can have both, as you are well aware. Keep your love, I’m not saying otherwise, but do so from a place of security. By the side of someone who can defend you and your child. Tell me his name.”

Ashara hesitated for a moment, long enough to give Anaris some hope, but then shook her head. “I am the daughter of a lord, sister to a kingguard, and handmaid to the future queen,” she retorted,
setting down the brush with a hard clatter, twisting her beautiful face into one of hard obstinacy.
“More than enough security; unless you’re saying you’ll disown me over this, in which case we can
go to father right now and see what he thinks about that!”

A hissed in breath, Anaris scowling severely. “Stop turning my words into something so vile, you
dramatic girl! I’m only saying a husband with a more permanent position would ensure that your
place in society never changes!”

“Your place, you mean?” The girl shoved to her feet with a jagged movement, fists clenched at her
sides, hair wild about her face. “Between the two of us, I’m the one that’s perfectly happy with what
I have! And just what are you insinuating, mother? That Elia would send me away?” She scoffed,
violet eyes flashing her anger. “You’d sooner do so than she. No, this child is mine alone!” She
asserted, bushing her hair insolently behind her ear. “Besides, a Northman would expect me to live
in some cold, dreary castle far from the capital. I won’t have it!”

Damn the girl, but sometimes it was like looking in a mirror! If only she’d inherited her mother’s
practicality instead of her father’s willfulness. Fine then, if Asahra was determined to be stubborn,
then Anaris wouldn’t hold back.

“Tell me,” she threatened sweetly, “Or I’ll send note to every Northman present in that tourney and
tell them that I’m seeking the vile lord who dishonored my daughter, stole her virtue, and got her
with child.”

Ashara’s mouth dropped open and for once she was rendered speechless. That state unfortunately
didn’t last, because in the next heartbeat her expression twisted. She cried, horrified, “You wouldn’t
dare!”

Well of course she wouldn’t, she wasn’t insane. She wouldn’t go so far as to humiliate her daughter
and House before the kingdoms. But Ashara didn’t know that. The girl knew the lengths her mother
was willing to go, so she would waver on whether or not Anaris was serious.

The elder woman drew herself up to her full height, a head shorter than her daughter, and calmly
held her aghast gaze. “The perpetrator will step forward, or his father will make him. At the very
least, some valiant knight will offer information, and this matter will be fodder for the gossips.” A
sharp inhale. “If you must do this, then better the northern kingdoms think you were unwittingly
dishonored, rather than having planned this all along. Perhaps a kind man seeking to remedy this
wrong will step forward and make an offer your behalf.”

Ashara began to sputter, “Mother! You can’t seriously think—even you wouldn’t—please!”

Anaris held resolute. She needed a name, and then she would be better able to decide what to do. If
the man was suitable, she’d contact him so he could help sway her daughter. If not, there were other
paths to consider.

Ashara wavered for a moment, her horror plain on her face, and Anaris snapped, “Tell me!”

Her daughter’s lovely face was panicked, searching her mother’s for any hint of weakness. The
erlder woman remained resolute… and something seemed to change in the girl. Ashara tilted her
head back and narrowed her eyes, her lips tilting into a frown and that violet gaze darkening. She
considered her mother, and slowly the horror faded away.

She looked… bored.

Anaris felt as if the a rock she’d been gripping had suddenly dissolved into water. “Tell me his
name,” she urged, steeping closer and grasping the girl’s thin upper arm. “You know I want only the best.”

Ashara smiled, and leaned her head back with a careless air. Then, very deliberately she said, “Brandon. Stark.”

Anaris hissed in a slow breath. “The heir to Winterfell.”

Ashara leaned forward, hair falling over her shoulder, and whispered as if sharing a secret. “The very same heir who should be married by now, his wife Catelyn Tully, the the pair no doubt already expecting their first child.” She smiled, impish. “I did say it was a virile seed.”

“I don’t believe you,” Anaris snapped.

Ashara faltered, sputtering, before rallying a indignant composure. “Then send your note,” she challenged. “You’ll expose us to the kingdoms only to find that I spoke true! Humiliating me for nothing!”

Anaris planted her hands on her hips, accusatory. “You wouldn’t have been so resistant to tell me if is was true.”

A tiny hesitation.

“I was angry because you invaded my privacy!” Ashara hastily claimed with an agitated wave of her hand. “Besides, I didn’t think you above trying to trap one of the other Stark sons in his place. But in that case I will deny it was lord Brandon. Even if you do send out those notes, it wont matter!” she declared. “I will not wed, do you here me!”

Mother and daughter squared off, mirrors of stubbornness. Anaris held her gaze, near positive it was all bravado talking, but Ashara’s was clear and direct. The elder woman gave an angry, defeated little groan. “A betrothed man, Ashara!”

A little shrug. A triumphant smirk. “I may be beautiful, but what is beauty compared to a son’s loyalty? What is an alliance to a faraway house when compared to one with an entire kingdom?” The cursed girl was absolutely smug. “Lord Brandon would not forsake his betrothed for me, let alone his wife.”

Her mother released a sharp sound, losing any real desire to pursue this further. She knew when to admit defeat.

“He’s not your type,” she muttered, folding her arms primly.

Ashara startled, and released a genuinely bright laugh, “Well that’s certainly true!”

Anaris’s couldn’t halt her lip quirking at seeing the honest amusement lighting her daughter’s face. Ashara saw the movement and her grin widened. She drew closer and linked her arms around her mothers neck, giving her forehead a stout kiss. Her lips were still pulled in a smile, and Anaris let out a put upon sigh.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

The girl grinned, stepped away, and let herself fall back on the bed.

“Careful,” Anaris snapped. “You’re expecting, so stop with those senseless actions.”
Ashara only giggled and rolled to and fro. “I’m ‘expecting” she echoed in wonder. “How very strange to think that a child is truly growing inside me. That I will be a mother.”

“A child having a child,” Anaris snipped, sitting down beside her daughter’s thighs, the girl’s legs handing off the bed. “How ridiculous.”

“Oh, don’t act like you aren’t already thinking of names, mother!”

The elder sniffed. “I can’t very well let you name it. You named your Sand Steed ‘Sandy’ and your hunting dog ‘Hunter.’ I shudder to think what you’d name a child.”

“I was ten!”

“More than old enough for some creativity. It’s why you’ve always gravitated towards intellectuals: seeking what you lack.” An offended gasp, easily ignored. “Did Brandon Stark have hidden depths?”

After a pause, Ashara muttered, “It’s not like conversation was the point.”

“The middle brother would have been a more practical choice,” her mother lectured. “What’s his name?”

With a groan, Ashara crawled up the bed until her head hit the pillow, closing her eyes. “Eddard. I danced with him, at Harrenhal. He could barely meet my eyes, he was so shy. But…sweet.” She paused. “There was a kindness about him.”

Anaris raised her brow. “And you chose the elder? Why? A lack of opportunity?”

A quiet exhale. “I didn’t want to break his heart.”

Well. That was as good a reason as any. But the way the girl said it, soft with an undertone of guilt, made Anaris wonder if the words were a statement…or an admission.

She supposed it didn’t matter in the end. She didn’t want her daughter on the other side of the kingdoms, so far they might never meet again. So far from the throne that her position would be meaningless. Ashara was meant for greater things than being wife to a second son.

When Rhaegar Targaryen became king, chances were good that he’d name Jon Connington as Hand. House Connington was a rich and old House with close ties and stout loyalties to the Targaryens. The current lord of Griffin’s Roost was unwed and, by all accounts, a fiery man with unyielding loyalty to the silver prince. If asked, Elia would be more than willing to persuade her husband to secure the match on Ashara’s behalf, and if it was Rhaegar’s wish, Jon Connington would wed the lady Dayne.

The Hand’s wife was the third most powerful woman in Westeros, after the queen and dowager queen.

But even if she wasn’t wife to the Hand, she’s still marry high in the court—likely to a council member—simply because of her proximity to the queen. Her ancient House and fabled beauty, which brought Anaris pride, only sweetened the pot. However, the eager suitors Ashara now had would not wed a woman with a natural child. Anaris would not let her daughter throw away this chance. She needed to ensure House Dayne’s place in court.

Ashara wasn’t thinking of the future. So Anaris would do it for her.
Delicately, she asked, “What is your plan for this child?”

The girl stretched her hands over her head, yawning. “To love it?”

“Be serious,” Anaris snapped, impatient. “Don’t you dare fall asleep, Ashara Dayne, there are things to consider.”

Ashara opened her eyes, sighing. “I’ll raise it and love it, what else?”

The elder woman exhaled sharply. Why did her children all have a habit of taking things one day at a time? Good planning was the foundation of success. “Where will you raise it? How will it be educated, with our traditions or those of the middle kingdoms? Which paths will you encourage the child to take?”

Ashara groaned, but obligingly took a second to consider.

Her lips slowly stretched into a wistful smile, and her answers, when they came, held an idealistic confidence. “Here for the first year, and wherever Elia is for the rest. Education: both, but Dornish traditions take precedence. And if he’s male, I’m sure Arthur will take him as squire, if female, Elia will make her Rhaenys’s handmaiden.”

Carefully, the elder woman said, “Boy or girl, the court will only see a bastard, and you know how they treat bastards. Your child will be a target.”

Ashara’s smile vanished, and she placed her hand on her stomach. She shook her head, resolute. “The court will be a different place when Elia is queen.”

A soft question, “Will it?”

The girl pushed herself up, glaring. “Get to your point already!”

So Anaris did, ruthlessly. “Soon, someone will call you ‘mother,’ Ashara. That changes a woman, to know that a tiny creature needs them, depends on them. True love is not between strangers, but between a parent and their child.” A pause, sober. “And any harm done to your blood will cut you twice over…and, I promise you, no matter who sits the throne, in the dragon’s court cruelty is a bastard’s lot.”

Her daughter’s hands were shaking. She hugged herself. “No. My child will be strong. Protected.”

“No one is strong all the time. No one can be shielded forever. Elia or this babe. That’s the choice if you continue forward.” She allowed a deliberately long pause to give the girl time to accept the truth of her words. Then, she stuck, like the scorpions that graced the Qorgyle sigil. “But there is a way you could have both.”

A difficult swallow, eyes narrowed, then, “How?”

After outlining her plan to an increasingly aghast Ashara, her mother left to let the girl stew.

Days later, Ashara found her early in the morning, dark bags under her eyes. There was a heartbreaking vulnerability in her gaze as she held her arms around herself. She was realizing, perhaps for the first time, when it meant to be a mother. Her voice shook, “How do we...?”

Anaris took the girl into her arms and kissed both cheeks. “Heed me.”

“And so you did,” Anaris murmured to the single grave at the trees roots, eleven years later.
A mere month after that conversation, a fleeing prince Rhaegar had arrived to change everything. Claimed that he’d seen the future in his *dreams*.

“It is destiny, my lady. The gods will not take us before we’ve fulfilled it.”

If there was one absolute truth about Rhaegar Targaryen, it was that his charisma and confidence in *destiny* could move mountains. It had certainly swayed half the court to his side, and would have swayed half the *kingdoms*…were it not for more ‘dreams.’

Rhaegar Targaryen did not waver. That was how he’d risen and fallen.

But fate or destiny or even *delusion* hadn’t mattered to *her*—all Anaris had seen was an opportunity. She’d chosen her king that day, and tossed all other loyalties aside. As the Rebellion raged outside their borders, the dragon prince, the wolf maid, and the falling stars had hatched a new scheme to fit *all* their desires.

All for naught, as it turned out. The old adage proved true: ‘Mortals plan, and gods laugh.’

‘Destiny’ had spit in all their faces. It turned out that famous charisma just hid another form of madness. *That* truth had hit Ashara the hardest, because he’d convinced her to *wait*.

Elia and Ashara had always been so fundamentally different: one looked fragile, yet had a heart of steel; the other seemed untamable, yet was pricked by the smallest hurt. What one lacked, the other had always supplemented.

Without one, the other was lost.

Ashara had lingered those last months, but grown more distant as time passed, staying away from her family, deaf to Allyria’s cries. In the weeks after Eddard left, she ate next to nothing and rarely got out of bed. Anaris should never have left her alone. She should have seen the dangerous thoughts under the grief.

But she’d been too preoccupied with her own.

“*Father, Arthur…Elia…they’re all dead, mother.*”

That was the last thing Ashara said before taking her own life. When they found her bruised and broken body washed up on the shore, her beautiful eyes bloated and their color leached away, Anaris knew the Faith would deny her daughter a funeral. She’d refused to let her child be shamed again.

They’d buried Ashara in secret. Their seven day sigil was a silent party of two. Standing over that fresh earth with her hollow son, Anaris had realized that power meant *nothing*. No more plots, she’d sworn. No more grasping schemes. She’d played, and she’d lost. Rebellions and princes and bastard boys? She had no more interest in any of it.

It turned out that Ashara had been right all along, and Anaris had been the fool between them: Love and family were all that mattered.

The lady Dayne had resolved to live quietly from then on. To be at peace.

But a mere ten years later, a plot born of greed had stolen her eldest, and a plot born of revenge threatened her grandchildren. The proud Daynes, ancient and revered, now trapped in the desert under the cruelty of a midday sun.

And so the game resumed, crushing pawns to dust.
“I won’t be one of them.” She swore, falling to her knees. She gripped the earth over Ashara’s grave, fingers digging into the soil, her tears nourishing the roots.

‘I didn’t want to break his heart…’ Ashara has said of Eddard Stark.

“Couldn’t you have done me the same courtesy, you ungrateful child?” Anaris whispered. The bark tore her skin and broke her nails. She didn’t let go.

Anaris Dayne had outlived her husband and children. Allyria and Edric were all she had left.

She refused to outlive them as well.

Chapter End Notes

Note 1: As Olenna showed, Jon Snow is not legitimate. Even if Rhaegar and Lyanna wed before the Old Gods, at best he’d only be considered legitimate by the North. Even if you disregard the fact that the Targaryens were legally deposed, he still would have no legal claim on the Iron Throne (which shouldn’t even matter at this point in the show). If he wants the throne (which show Jon does not), then he has to take it by force just like everyone else. This message is brought to you by Magicmoon’s frustration towards YouTube comment sections and season 7 in general. Mini-rant over.

Note 2: About Jon’s Nameday: A while ago I read somewhere that it was in May and since I couldn’t find a detailed timeline of events, I just went with it. But after considering the logistics of Ned’s trip south, and his presence in KL (in this story) in January a week after Dany was born, then logically Jon’s birthday would be much later in the year. So, to explain the May 5th date, that was just what Ned told Jon when he asked, in order to confuse the timeline since Jon will be under greater scrutiny due to the betrothal. Everyone knows the general time Lyanna died of fever, so this date is to throw them off that trail. Coincidentally, May 5th is also around the time Ned buried Rickard, Brandon, and Lyanna, so that whole month is not a good time for him. In reality, Jon’s birthday is October 5th. It doesn’t change anything in the current story.

Note 3: Hope you’ve enjoyed (or at least contextually understood) a taste of my Dorne. I took huge liberties in terms of their culture, beliefs, and religion while trying to fit it into the context of their history. So far in the story, I’ve portrayed Dorne as the “best” kingdom, and it’s certainly progressive in terms of gender equality, homosexuality, sexual liberation, and their treatment of bastard children. Their court is also much more casual, open, and merry, placing greater weight in individual voices. However, all cultures have their dark sides, and Dorne’s is an extreme intolerance for weakness and “submissive” traits. You have to be bold, and wild, and cunning in Dorne, which is why Doran is such an unpopular Prince in canon while Oberyn is so beloved. They see fighting and resistance as a point of pride and a vital part of their cultural identity. That pressure is extremely potent and brings about its own slew of difficulties.

Note 4: About the weirwood in Starfall, I have no idea if they canonically have one or not, but I need it for plot reasons. I have checked and you can grow a tree from a properly cut branch. Also, Weirwoods are extremely stubborn trees which did use to thrive all over the south. While Starfall is in Dorne and thus has an extremely hot climate, the lands are blessed with an abundance of water so the conditions to grow
foliage is more than appropriate.

Note 5: Finally, regarding Ashara, I know the idea that she actually did commit suicide is controversial in this fandom, and I’ve read all the different theories of where she could be, who she could be (Lemore is a popular one), and why she ‘faked her death,’ but I honestly don’t buy them. Whatever her circumstances were, I believe the point of ‘Ashara Dayne’ is to be a cautionary tale about the consequences of war and death on the innocent. She is only so salient in our memory because of her personal infamy; the time in which she lived; and the striking tragedy of her death. Suicide, even in a novel series that seems to depict every type of horrible death, remains on the mind. However, I also think that being convinced that she of all people is still alive due to the method of her death also discredits the very real fact that people do commit suicide, that experiencing a tragedy has very real, traumatic consequences. I very much understand the desire for her to be alive, not only so she can shed some light on all the mysteries of the Rebellion, but also because we hope she was able to heal from that time in her life that drove her to such lengths. So, while she still be alive in the books for some yet undisclosed reason, but that’s not true in this story. As such, I hope I gave Ashara as much happiness as she could have in the short life she lived. Thus my choice of who she loved.

To any reader that is having a difficult time right now, to anyone coping with tragedy or hardships, I sincerely hope that things get better, and ask that you seek help. There are people and places out there for you, so please reach out if you ever find yourself thinking life is just too hard.

You matter.

End Notes

Mix of Book and Show

Works inspired by this one: Winter Roses: Summer by fairytales0vr, Wolf's Reign by KrimzonStriker

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!